Research and analysis

Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges

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Applies to England

Contents

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Introduction

Ofsted was asked by the government to carry out a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. This report summarises our findings and recommendations.

We were asked to report on the following:

Safeguarding and curriculum

- Is the existing safeguarding framework and guidance for inspectors strong enough to properly assess how schools and colleges safeguard and promote the welfare of children?
- How can schools and colleges be supported further to successfully deliver the new RSHE (relationships, sex and health education) curriculum, including in teaching about sexual abuse, cyber bullying and pornography as well as healthy relationships and consent?

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements

- How well are safeguarding guidance and processes understood and working between schools, colleges and local multi-agency partners?
- Does working between schools, colleges and local safeguarding partners (LSPs), including local authority children's social care, the police, health services and other support, need to be strengthened?

Victims' voice and reporting

- How does the current system of safeguarding in schools and colleges listen to the voices of children when reporting sexual abuse whether occurring within or outside school?
- What prevents children from reporting sexual abuse?
- Do victims receive timely and appropriate support from the right place?
- Have inspections by ISI (the Independent Schools Inspectorate) and Ofsted been robust enough in relation to the issues raised?

Other considerations

In addition to what the government asked us to report on, we have also considered:

- the range, nature, location and severity of allegations and incidents, together with context
- the extent of schools'/colleges' (and other agencies' and adults') knowledge of specific incidents and more general problems
- schools' safeguarding responses to known incidents and wider social and cultural problems, including:
  - their immediate response to specific incidents, including referrals to LSPs and victim support (and liaison with other schools/colleges, where those involved attend different schools/colleges from abusers)
  - schools'/colleges' use of sanctions
  - any factors that have limited any immediate or subsequent response
- schools' safeguarding knowledge, culture and effectiveness, including their willingness to function as part of the wider safeguarding system with other partners
- the adequacy of schools' RSHE/PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) curriculum and teaching
- the extent to which recent inspections explored relevant cases and issues

Executive summary and recommendations

The review included visits to 32 schools and colleges. In these, we spoke to over 900 children and young people about the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, in their lives and the lives of their peers.[footnote 1] We also spoke to leaders, teachers, governors, LSPs, parents and stakeholders. Finally, we reviewed the extent to which inspection has given sufficient oversight of this issue and considered how statutory guidance could be strengthened.

This rapid review does not report on individual schools and colleges or cases, all of which remain anonymous. We made a number of visits to schools named on the Everyone's Invited website, as well as others not named. But this should not be assumed to be a fully representative sample of all schools and colleges nationally. It presents a picture of strong and weaker practice across participating schools and colleges, from which we have drawn our conclusions. Our conclusions reflect the strengths and limitations of the evidence. They focus on what we were asked to report on. You can find a full description of the methodology at the end of this report.

This rapid thematic review has revealed how prevalent sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are for children and young people. It is concerning that for some children, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them. This review did not analyse whether the issue is more or less prevalent for different groups of young people, and there may well be differences, but it found that the issue is so widespread that it needs addressing for all children and young people. It recommends that schools, colleges and multi-agency partners act as though sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening, even when there are no specific reports.

On our visits, girls told us that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, such as being sent unsolicited explicit sexual material and being pressured to send nude pictures ('nudes'), are much more prevalent than adults realise. For example, nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. Children and young people told us that sexual harassment occurs so frequently that it has become 'commonplace'. For example, 92% of girls, and 74% of boys, said sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. The frequency of these harmful sexual behaviours means that some children and young people consider them normal.

When we asked children and young people where sexual violence occurred, they typically talked about unsupervised spaces outside of school, such as parties or parks without adults present, although some girls told us they also experienced unwanted touching in school corridors.

Children and young people, especially girls, told us that they do not want to talk about sexual abuse for several reasons, even where their school encourages them to. For example, the risk of being ostracised by peers or getting peers into trouble is not considered to be worth it for something perceived by children and young people to be commonplace. They worry about how adults will react, because they think they will not be believed, or that they will be blamed. They also think that once they talk to an adult, the process will be out of their control.

Children and young people were rarely positive about the RSHE they had received. They felt that it was too little, too late and that the curriculum was not equipping them with the information and advice they needed to navigate the reality of their lives. Because of these gaps, they told us they turned to social media or their peers to educate each other, which understandably made some feel resentful. As one girl put it, 'It shouldn't be our responsibility to educate boys'.

In the schools and colleges we visited, some teachers and leaders underestimated the scale of the problem. They either did not identify sexual harassment and sexualised language as problematic or they were unaware they were happening. They were dealing with incidents of sexual violence

when they were made aware of them, and following statutory guidance. But professionals consistently underestimated the prevalence of online sexual abuse, even when there was a proactive whole-school approach to tackling sexual harassment and violence.

In light of this, even where school and college leaders do not have specific information that indicates sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are problems for their children and young people, they should act on the assumption that they are. Leaders should take a whole-school/college approach to developing a culture where all kinds of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are recognised and addressed. To achieve this, schools and colleges need to create an environment where staff model respectful and appropriate behaviour, where children and young people are clear about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and where they are confident to ask for help and support when they need it. Central to this should be a carefully planned and implemented RSHE curriculum, sanctions and interventions to tackle poor behaviour and provide support for children and young people who need it, training and clear expectations for staff and governors, and listening to pupil voice. Further guidance on many of these aspects can be found in 'Keeping children safe in education'.[footnote 2]

When it comes to sexual violence, it appears that school and college leaders are increasingly having to make difficult decisions that guidance does not equip them to make. For example, some school and college leaders told us that they are unsure how to proceed when criminal investigations do not lead to a prosecution or conviction. Schools and colleges should not be left to navigate these 'grey areas' without sufficient guidance. Furthermore, the current guidance does not clearly differentiate between different types of behaviour or reflect the language that children and young people use, particularly for online sexual abuse.

Schools and colleges cannot tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, on their own, and neither should they. For example, the prevalence of children and young people seeing explicit material they do not want to see and being pressured to send 'nudes' is a much wider problem than schools can address. While they can play their part, it is not only their responsibility to solve it. The government will need to tackle this issue through the Online Safety Bill, and other interventions.

The LSPs that we met had varying levels of oversight and understanding of the issues for children and young people in their area. Some LSPs had been working closely with schools to track and analyse data from schools, and understood children's experiences of sexual harassment and violence, including online. However, a small number told us that they were not aware that sexual harassment and violence, including online, in schools and colleges were significant problems in their local area. In light of what children and young people told us, they almost certainly are significant problems in every area. Gaining an overview of the issues requires effective joint working between LSPs and all schools and colleges, something that is

not currently happening consistently. Some schools and colleges also reported that working across a number of local authorities presented challenges, as the level of support varied from area to area. Clearer guidance would help to overcome some of these difficulties, as would more learning and sharing of practice across LSPs, schools and colleges.

A review of Ofsted and Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) frameworks, training and handling of complaints found that safeguarding is generally well covered on inspection, inspectors are prepared, and complaints are generally dealt with well. However, there are improvements that can be made. As a result of this review, both Ofsted and ISI will update training, inspection handbooks and inspection practices where necessary to strengthen inspectors' ability to inspect how schools and colleges are tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. Ofsted will follow up the publication of this report with a series of webinars and events for schools and colleges to discuss the findings of this review. ISI will also provide a series of webinars and events for schools about the findings of this review.

As a result of the findings of this review, we recommend the following.

Recommendations for school and college leaders

School and college leaders should create a culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are not tolerated, and where they identify issues and intervene early to better protect children and young people.

In order to do this, they should assume that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening in their setting, even when there are no specific reports, and put in place a whole-school approach to address them. This should include:

- a carefully sequenced RSHE curriculum, based on the Department for Education's (DfE's) statutory guidance, that specifically includes sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. This should include time for open discussion of topics that children and young people tell us they find particularly difficult, such as consent and the sending of 'nudes'
- high-quality training for teachers delivering RSHE
- routine record-keeping and analysis of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, to identify patterns and intervene early to prevent abuse
- a behavioural approach, including sanctions when appropriate, to reinforce a culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are not tolerated

- working closely with LSPs in the area where the school or college is located so they are aware of the range of support available to children and young people who are victims or who perpetrate harmful sexual behaviour
- support for designated safeguarding leads (DSLs), such as protected time in timetables to engage with LSPs
- training to ensure that all staff (and governors, where relevant) are able to:
  - better understand the definitions of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse
  - identify early signs of peer-on-peer sexual abuse
  - consistently uphold standards in their responses to sexual harassment and online sexual abuse

Recommendations for multi-agency partners

Multi-agency partners should:

- work to improve engagement with schools of all types in their local area, tailoring their approach to what their analysis (produced in partnership with schools/colleges and wider safeguarding partners) indicates are the risks to children and young people in their local area

Recommendations for government

The government should:

- take into account the findings of this review as it develops the Online Safety Bill, so it can strengthen safeguarding controls for children and young people to protect them from viewing online explicit material and engaging in harmful sexual behaviour using social media platforms
- establish better coordinated arrangements between the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), Ofsted and ISI for how to deal with complaints that inspectorates receive about schools
- strengthen the ‘Working together to safeguard children’ guidance to make the involvement of all state and independent schools and colleges with LSPs more explicit, including their engagement in multi-agency safeguarding audits
- produce clearer guidance for schools and colleges to help them make decisions when there are long-term investigations of harmful sexual

behaviour, or when a criminal investigation does not lead to a prosecution or conviction

- review and update the definitions of sexual abuse, including peer-on-peer, to better reflect the experiences of children and young people
- develop an online hub where all safeguarding guidance is in one place, with any updates clearly visible and ideally made in good time in the school year to aid planning
- in partnership with others:
  - develop a guide that helps children and young people know what might happen next when they talk to an adult in school or college about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse
  - develop national training for DSLs
  - develop resources to help schools and colleges shape their RSHE curriculum
  - launch a communications campaign about sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, which should include advice for parents and carers

Actions for the inspectorates

This review has identified a number of areas where Ofsted and ISI can sharpen practice and, in doing so, focus schools' and colleges' attention on this important area of their work.

Peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, have been considered during inspection as part of safeguarding in schools and colleges over the last few years. However, changes to government guidance and some inconsistencies in inspection documentation across education remits mean that updating of inspection handbooks is required. For example, from September, Ofsted's inspection handbook for further education and skills will include the same references to peer-on-peer sexual abuse as the current school inspection handbook. Inspectors for Ofsted and ISI will also consider how well schools fulfil the new duties to deliver the compulsory RSHE curriculum.

For 2021/22 and beyond, Ofsted and ISI will work together to produce and jointly deliver further training on inspecting safeguarding in education settings, including looking at issues of peer-on-peer sexual abuse.

In line with our practice for schools, Ofsted will request that college leaders supply records and analysis of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, to inspectors. ISI will also specifically request for schools to provide the same records on notification of inspection, in addition to its current practice. There will be additional training for inspectors from both

inspectorates to ensure that they record how they have followed up this information on inspection. Additionally, inspectors will hold discussions with single-sex groups of pupils where this helps to understand better a school's or college's approach to tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online.

Definitions

In this report, we use the DfE's definitions of sexual abuse and peer-on-peer abuse.[footnote 3]

Peer-on-peer sexual abuse

The term 'peer-on-peer' sexual abuse includes:

- sexual violence, such as rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault
- sexual harassment, such as sexual comments, remarks, jokes and online sexual harassment, which may be stand-alone or part of a broader pattern of abuse
- upskirting, which typically involves taking a picture under a person's clothing without them knowing, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks to obtain sexual gratification, or to cause the victim humiliation, distress or alarm
- sexting (also known as 'youth-produced sexual imagery')[footnote 4]

There were a wide variety of behaviours that children and young people told us happen online. These include:

- receiving unsolicited explicit photographs or videos, for example 'dick pics'
- sending, or being pressured to send, nude and semi-nude photographs or videos ('nudes')
- being sent or shown solicited or unsolicited online explicit material, such as pornographic videos

Typical platforms for sharing material between peers tended to be WhatsApp or Snapchat.

'Keeping children safe in education' says that all staff should be aware that children are capable of abusing their peers and that they should be clear about their relevant policies and procedures to address peer-on-peer abuse.

We acknowledge that the term ‘peer-on-peer’ does not refer only to sexual abuse, but also to other forms of child-on-child abuse, such as bullying. The term ‘peer-on-peer abuse’ is helpful in focusing professionals’ attention on the fact that children can abuse other children. However, in the context of sexual abuse it could lead to professionals dismissing potentially harmful sexual behaviour as simply ‘developmental’, when there are power dynamics, age imbalances and other aspects that would warrant further investigation. In this report, we use the term ‘peer-on-peer’ while recognising its limitations.

Harmful sexual behaviour

When we refer to harmful sexual behaviour, we use the same definition as the DfE:[footnote 5]

> “ Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or abusive towards another child, young person or adult.”

When we refer to sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, we use the definitions and the language of victim and perpetrator in the DfE’s guidance.[footnote 6] We recognise that there are many different ways to describe children who have been subjected to sexual harassment and/or sexual violence. There are also many ways to describe those who are alleged to have carried out any form of abuse. Therefore, we are using the terms that are most widely recognised and understood. It is important to recognise that not everyone who has been subjected to sexual harassment and/or sexual violence, including online, considers themselves a victim or would want to be described in this way.

Any child or young person who exhibits harmful sexual behaviour may need a safeguarding response or intervention. Professionals should respond with interventions that address the behaviour of the perpetrator, while also providing an appropriate level of support. Professionals involved should be aware that harmful sexual behaviour may be an indicator that the child has been abused.[footnote 7], [footnote 8]

It is also important to note that, although professionals’ awareness of the vulnerability of children and young people could be helpful, it could also contribute to stereotypes about how a victim and survivor of child sexual abuse should look or behave. This may run the risk of victims who differ from that picture being overlooked or unwilling to come forward for fear of not being believed.[footnote 9]

The following model is used to explain the continuum of sexual behaviours presented by children and young people, from normal to violent. Harmful sexual behaviour encompasses a range of behaviour, which can be displayed towards younger children, peers, older children or adults. It can occur online and offline or a mixture of both.

Figure 1. Definition: Sexual behaviours across a continuum

Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
- Developmentally expected - Socially acceptable - Consensual, mutual, reciprocal - Shared decision-making	- Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour - Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group - Context for behaviour may be inappropriate - Generally consensual and reciprocal	- Problematic and concerning behaviour - Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected - No overt elements of victimisation - Consent issues may be unclear - May lack reciprocity or equal power - May include levels of compulsivity	- Victimising intent or outcome - Includes misuse of power - Coercion and force to ensure victim compliance - Intrusive - Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given by victim - May include elements of expressive violence	- Physi violent abuse - Highly intrusiv - Instru violenc psycho and/or arousin perpetr - Sadis

Source: Hackett, S, ‘Children, young people and sexual violence’ in ‘Children behaving badly? Exploring peer violence between children and young people’, 2010.

The DfE has published guidance for schools and colleges to help them to respond to sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, between children. This explains that it is an offence for anyone to have any sexual activity with a person under the age of 16 and provides specific protection for children aged 12 and under who cannot legally give their consent to any form of sexual activity. The guidance acknowledges that

professionals may be required to make complex decisions in situations of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. It stresses the importance of effective training and clear policies for staff to help them take a considered and appropriate response.

Therefore, when schools and colleges[footnote 10] are made aware of sexual activity involving a child under the age of 13, they should always refer this to the police and children's social care. They should use the statutory guidance and their professional curiosity to establish whether risk factors are present before making a decision on whether to engage external agencies if the children are aged 13 to 17.

What did we find out about the scale and nature of sexual abuse in schools?

What existing research and data tell us

Data on this topic largely focuses on child sexual abuse in general, not specifically peer-on-peer. We know that issues of under-reporting and inconsistency in how professionals define harmful sexual behaviour mean that accurate data collection is difficult.[footnote 11] We explore the issues of under-reporting and data tracking in later sections of this report.

Nationally collected statistics show that there has been a sharp increase in reporting of child sexual abuse to the police in recent years. Figures that include all child sexual abuse cases show that the police recorded over 83,000 child sexual abuse offences (including obscene publications) in the year ending March 2020.[footnote 12], [footnote 13] This is an increase of approximately 267% since 2013. Research estimates indicate that approximately one quarter of cases of all child sexual abuse involve a perpetrator under the age of 18.[footnote 14]

Although anyone can experience sexual harassment and violence, research indicates that girls are disproportionately affected. For example, 90% of recorded offences of rape in 2018–19 of 13- to 15-year-olds were committed against girls.[footnote 15], [footnote 16] In the past year, girls aged between 15 and 17 reported the highest annual rates of sexual abuse for young people and children aged 25 and younger.[footnote 17]

It is hard to get an accurate picture of the scale and nature of sexual harassment and violence between children and young people in schools and colleges, as there is no centralised data collection of incidents and

crime statistics are not published with a level of analysis to shed any light on this. It would be helpful if this information was available routinely.

In 2016, the Women and Equalities Select Committee highlighted a number of surveys reporting that girls were experiencing high levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, in schools and colleges. [footnote 18] Similarly, a survey of children and young people in 2017 found that over a third of female students at mixed-sex secondary schools have personally experienced some form of sexual harassment at school.[footnote 19]

Three sources of information that were available for this review are: published school exclusions data,[footnote 20] Ofsted complaints data and an FOI request made to the police in 2015 by the BBC.

Published school exclusions data shows:

- In the 5 academic years to 2018/19, permanent exclusions for which the primary reason was sexual misconduct averaged 91 per year, 1.3% of all permanent exclusions.
- Most of these permanent exclusions were from secondary schools. There are approximately 3,400 mainstream state-funded secondary schools, so, if evenly spread, this would mean on average around 2% of secondaries currently make a permanent exclusion for this reason in any given year.
- While the total number of permanent exclusions increased during that period, there was no clear trend in the number of exclusions for sexual misconduct.
- In the same 5-year period, suspensions for which the primary reason was sexual misconduct averaged 2,100 per year, 0.6% of all suspensions.
- Again, most of these exclusions were from secondary schools. As stated above, there are approximately 3,400 mainstream state-funded secondary schools. So again, if evenly spread, this would mean on average 55% of secondaries currently make a suspension for this reason in any given year.
- In the latest reported year (2018/19), suspension for sexual misconduct fell by 13% relative to the average of the previous 4 years.

Ofsted receives complaints from pupils and parents who have been unable to resolve complaints through local routes. Between September 2019 and March 2021, we received 291 complaints about schools that referred to peer-on-peer sexual harassment or violence, including online sexual abuse, out of 13,834 complaints (2% of the total). ISI reports that between the same dates, it received 37 complaints about schools that referred to peer-on-peer sexual harassment or violence, out of 618 complaints (6% of the total).

In 2015, the police responded to an FOI request and reported that nearly 4,000 alleged physical sexual assaults and more than 600 rapes in schools

had been reported in the preceding 3 years.[footnote 21] Further discussions with the police showed that the data included incidents involving adults and may also include some incidents reported by schools but that took place outside school. The police have told Ofsted that this data should therefore not be taken as an estimate of sexual assaults and rapes by pupils in schools.

The scope of this review was such that we cannot say anything about which children and young people are most likely to be targeted for sexual harassment and/or violence or about which are most likely to abuse others.

What did children, young people and professionals tell us about sexual harassment and violence between peers and where did perceptions differ?

During our visits, we gathered the views of approximately 900 children and young people in focus groups. Of those, we surveyed just over 800 children and young people aged 13 and above about their perceptions of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse.

Children and young people tended to talk to us about the issues that were the most common in their lives, which were typically sexual harassment and online sexual abuse. However, we are aware of the significant impact that sexual violence has on some children and young people's lives and we heard several distressing examples from DSLs as part of this review. While this section focuses largely on what children and young people told us was most common, we do not want to minimise or ignore other experiences that children told us about. Where we can, we reference these experiences and use wider literature to supplement our findings where there are gaps.

The girls who responded to our questionnaire indicated that, in order of prevalence, the following types of harmful sexual behaviours happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes' between people their age:

Non-contact forms, but face-to-face:

- sexist name-calling (92%)
- rumours about their sexual activity (81%)
- unwanted or inappropriate comments of a sexual nature (80%)

Non-contact forms, online or on social media:

- being sent pictures or videos they did not want to see (88%)
- being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves (80%)

- having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent (73%)
- being photographed or videoed without their knowledge or consent (59%)
- having pictures or videos of themselves that they did not know about being circulated (51%)

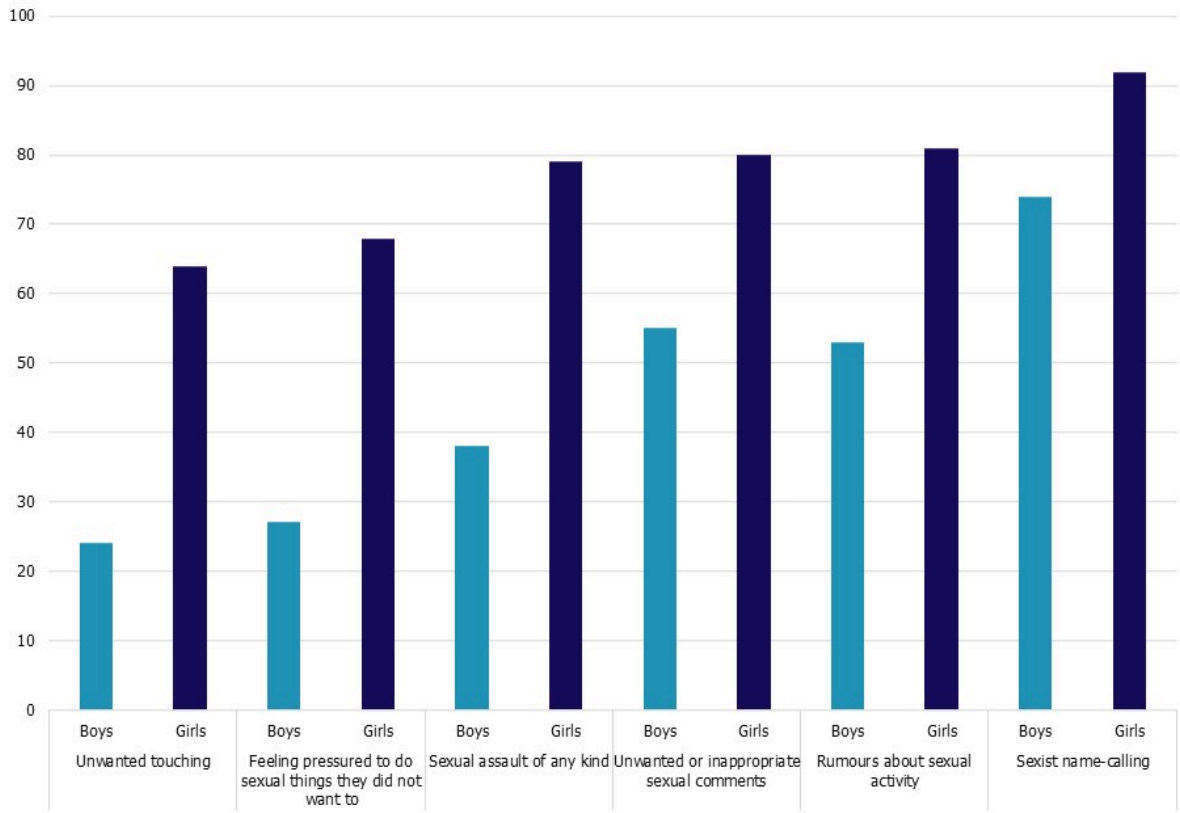
Contact forms:

- sexual assault of any kind (79%)
- feeling pressured to do sexual things that they did not want to (68%)
- unwanted touching (64%)

These findings are strongly supported by existing research into harmful sexual behaviour between peers.[footnote 22], [footnote 23]

Boys were much less likely to think these things happened, particularly contact forms of harmful sexual behaviour, as shown in the chart below:

Figure 2. These things happen ‘a lot’ or ‘sometimes’ between people my age (%)



	Boys	Girls
Unwanted touching	24	64
Feeling pressured to do sexual things they did not want to	27	68
Sexual assault of any kind	38	79
Unwanted or inappropriate sexual comments	55	80
Rumours about sexual activity	53	81
Sexist name-calling	74	92

Note: around 790 pupils answered the question for each type of harmful sexual behaviour. The number varies slightly by question because a few children and young people skipped some questions.

In the focus groups, many children and young people talked about teachers not ‘knowing the reality’ of their lives, or being ‘out of date’. In general, they reported much higher incidences of sexual harassment, online sexual abuse and bullying behaviours than teachers and leaders tended to be aware of.

In some schools, leaders’ estimation of the scale of the problem was more aligned with that of the children and young people’s perceptions than that of teachers. This may be explained by the fact that leaders and DSLs typically deal with confidential safeguarding cases. However, it does point to the need for development and training for all school staff on prevalence and what constitutes harmful sexual behaviour. For example, in one school, children and young people told us that the sharing of ‘nudes’ was widespread and that ‘body shaming’ and ‘slut shaming’ were also common. However, staff in this school thought that incidents largely happened outside school. One male member of staff said that there were ‘high levels of mutual respect’ between children and young people in school. Leaders were more aware of issues in the school, and the need to change what they referred to as the ‘rugby culture’, but this did not translate to all staff recognising the scale of the problem.

More positively, in some schools, staff and leaders’ perceptions of the extent of harmful sexual behaviour seemed to be fairly aligned with those of children and young people. This appears to be the case in schools where the topic has been – and continues to be – openly discussed and challenged, and where records of incidents are kept and analysed.

Generally, older teens (aged 16 and above) were more likely to say that sexual harassment and violence, including online, between peers was prevalent than younger teens (aged 13 to 15) were. For example, 79% of

young people aged 16 to 17 and 86% of those aged 18 and above said that rumours about sexual activity occurred a lot or sometimes between peers compared with 61% of those aged 13 to 15. Similarly, 54% of those aged 16 and above said unwanted touching occurred a lot or sometimes, compared with 40% of 13- to 15-year-olds. While figures are high for both groups, this increase could suggest that sexual harassment and violence, including online, happen more as children and young people grow older, or that they become more aware of them.

In terms of sexualised language, children and young people told us that 'slag' and 'slut' were commonplace and that homophobic language was also used in school. Many felt that staff either were not aware of this language, dismissed it as 'banter' or simply were not prepared to tackle it. Many also commented that they would be wary of tackling their peers' use of this language, even when they did not feel comfortable with such terms. Sometimes, children and young people themselves saw the use of derogatory language as 'banter' or 'just a joke'. In one school, the girls spoke of lots of 'cat calling', often focused on their bodies, their hair colour, their size or whether they were wearing glasses. In another, girls said that boys used terms such as 'flat, curvy or sick' to describe them and girls found this derogatory. In another, children and young people reported boys giving girls marks out of 10 based on their physical appearance while they were travelling to and from school together.

Some children, young people and staff mentioned sexual and sexist comments happening in corridors. Some girls felt uncomfortable when boys walked behind them up stairs and in stairwells where people can see up their skirts from below. Boys in another school said that they felt anxious when walking behind girls or women, including out of school, as they did not want the girls to feel at risk, so tended to cross the road or move away. In another school, girls said that they were 'touched up' regularly in crowded corridors. Some named the areas of the college or school where they felt wary of being – either because they were out of sight of staff or because they felt uncomfortable with the people who 'hang around' there.

Other areas or situations were school-specific. For example, we heard cases of boys' toilets with no locks, a swimming pool changing room where a single door meant that girls believed people could see them naked as they walked by, and a male teacher who gave girls compliments about their appearance.

Overall, children and young people tended to say that they felt physically safe at college or school, although there was a clear emotional impact on girls who experienced regular sexual harassment or other harmful sexual behaviour. This highlights the need for school leaders to take an approach to tackling sexual harassment and bullying behaviours that goes beyond tackling incidents in isolation. Given that children and young people talked in particular about sexual harassment happening in unsupervised spaces, such as in corridors between lessons, school leaders should identify where

there might be ‘hot-spots’ of poor behaviour and act accordingly. When children and young people talked about feeling physically unsafe, this generally related to situations that occurred outside school.

Boys and girls sometimes, though not always, had different perspectives and concerns. In one school, for example, girls told us that sexual harassment was ‘a big deal’ but boys did not recognise that it was happening or identify it as abuse. Girls in this school described routine name-calling, sexual comments and objectification. Boys described jokes and compliments – but said that, for them, homophobia and racism were concerns. In another example, girls thought that things like sexist or sexualised language were common and that being asked to share inappropriate images happened regularly, but boys did not see this as an issue. Boys recognised some of the behaviours described but did not see them as widespread.

Some schools on our visits had existing LGBT+ pupil groups that were willing to speak to us. LGBT+ children and young people in those groups also reported a big gap between staff’s knowledge of incidents and their daily experience of harmful sexual behaviour. Homophobic and transphobic insults and bullying in corridors and classrooms and at social times were mentioned as issues in several schools. Some LGBT+ children and young people reported constant verbal abuse and occasional physical assault, which left them feeling physically unsafe. One teacher reported that she frequently heard both homophobic and sexist language but did not challenge this as she did not think she would be supported by other staff and her challenges would be disregarded. Literature on the experiences of LGBT+ young people also indicates that they are more likely to experience child sexual abuse and less likely to report sexual abuse than their peers. [footnote 24]

What did children, young people and professionals tell us about sexual abuse between peers online?

Previous research indicated that children and young people who are sending nudes and semi-nudes are in the minority. For example, research in 2017 indicated that 26% of young people had sent a nude image to someone they were interested in and 48% had received one of someone else.[footnote 25] However, more recent data on youth-produced sexual imagery for under-18s indicates that they are increasingly taking photos and videos of themselves to send to others. This includes incidents where they are groomed by adults to do so.

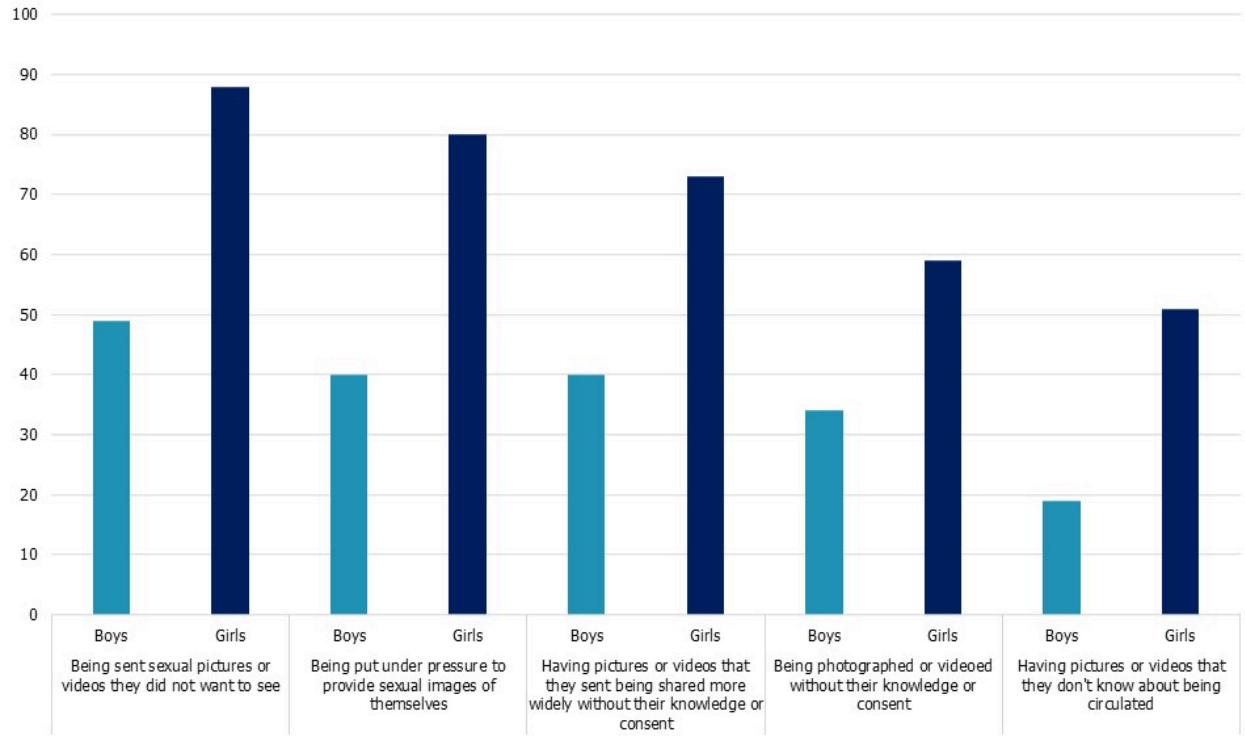
Data from the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) shows a sharp increase in online sexual abuse images involving young people, which it partially

attributes to a rise in the sharing of ‘self-generated’ content.[footnote 26] In the first 6 months of 2020, 44% of all child sexual abuse content dealt with by the IWF was assessed as containing self-generated images or videos, compared with 29% in 2019. The proliferation of online imagery makes it a challenge for researchers, multi-agency partners and schools to keep up, despite recent government guidance.[footnote 27]

Children and young people told us that online forms of sexual abuse were prevalent, especially being sent sexual pictures or videos that they did not want to see. The vast majority of girls said being sent sexual images, being coerced into sharing images, or having their images reshared were common. A significant proportion of boys agreed. In terms of definitions, being sent sexual pictures of images that children and young people do not want to see includes both explicit online material, such as pornographic videos, or self-generated images or videos, such as ‘dick pics’.

Images and videos were typically shared on platforms such as WhatsApp or Snapchat. Some DSLs told us that children and young people were sometimes added to large groups of peers on WhatsApp without their permission, where graphic material was shared without them properly knowing who they were interacting with.

Figure 3. These things happen ‘a lot’ or ‘sometimes’ between people my age (%)



	Boys	Girls
Being sent sexual pictures or videos they did not want to see	49	88
Being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves	40	80
Having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent	40	73
Being photographed or videoed without their knowledge or consent	34	59
Having pictures or videos that they don't know about being circulated	19	51

Note: the number of both boys and girls who answered the question for each type of harmful sexual behaviour is around 790, and slightly different for each. This is because a few children and young people skipped some questions.

Although some school leaders defined online sexual harassment as 'happening out of school', we saw some clear evidence of how online sexual harassment has a significant impact on the normalisation of harmful sexual behaviour and unhealthy cultures within school. This was something that the victims' groups we spoke to also highlighted. In one school, for example, children and young people told inspectors that 'boys talk about whose "nudes" they have and share them among themselves – it's like a collection game'. Many children and young people told inspectors that this behaviour was so commonplace that they just saw it as a 'part of life'. One Year 12 student said, 'The problem is that it's so widespread it's like playing whack-a-mole.'

Girls talked about boys being very persistent when asking for images – 'they just won't take no for an answer' – some explained that if you block them on social media 'they just create multiple accounts to harass you'. In one school, the girls spoken to by inspectors reported that some girls can be contacted by up to 10 or 11 different boys a night to be asked for nude/semi-nude images. Some children and young people thought that it was 'ok' and 'acceptable' to ask someone for a nude picture, but had been taught to think about who else might see the pictures apart from the original recipient, and not to share them further.

Some girls expressed frustration that there was not explicit teaching of what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. They felt that the need to educate peers had been left to them. One girl said: 'It shouldn't be our responsibility to educate boys.' A minority of boys felt that gender

stereotyping meant that they were being made to ‘feel guilty all the time’ and that they were being unfairly blamed for things they had not done. Nearly half of boys also said that being sent sexual images or videos they did not want to see was something that happened ‘a lot’ or ‘sometimes’ to them or their peers.

Research in this area indicates that, while most secondary school pupils recognise the harm that sexual approaches from adult strangers online bring, there is less clarity about what constitutes sexual harm within the context of peer relationships or existing online networks.[footnote 28] This shows the need for a whole-school approach that tackles sexual harassment and online sexual abuse proactively. This should include a well-sequenced RSHE curriculum, which incorporates time for open discussion of areas that children and young people tell us they are finding particularly difficult.

There is some evidence that suggests access to technology and the sharing of inappropriate images and videos are also issues in primary schools. For example, in one all-through school, leaders have identified a trend of cases in the primary school that are linked to social media. There is a no-phone policy in this school, so incidents are likely taking place outside school. Incidents cited include viewing pornography, requests to look up pornography websites and viewing inappropriate images on social media. There was an example from another school of children in Years 6 and 7 sending nudes.

Leaders we spoke to also highlighted the problems that easy access to pornography had created and how pornography had set unhealthy expectations of sexual relationships and shaped children and young people’s perceptions of women and girls. Evidence suggests that nearly half (48%) of 11- to 16-year-olds in the UK have viewed pornography. Of these, boys were approximately twice as likely as girls to have actively searched for it.[footnote 29] However, 60% of 11- to 13-year-olds who had seen pornography said their viewing of pornography was mostly unintentional.[footnote 30]

A recent survey of over 1,000 undergraduates found that one third said they have ‘learned more about sex from pornography than from formal education’.[footnote 31] While research indicates that most children and young people recognise that pornography is unrealistic, a high percentage of them reported that they had used pornography as a source of information to learn about sex and sexual relationships in the past 12 months (60% of young men and 41% of young women). This is problematic when research indicates that much pornography depicts men as aggressive and controlling and women as submissive and sexually objectified.[footnote 32]

Although there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that viewing pornography leads directly to harmful sexual behaviours, there is evidence to suggest that young people appear to become desensitised to its content

over time and that it can shape unhealthy attitudes, such as acceptance of sexual aggression towards women.[footnote 33], [footnote 34] More frequent consumption of pornography is also associated with victim-blaming attitudes. For example, it may lead to the belief that if a woman is affected by alcohol or drugs, she is at least partly responsible for whatever happens to her.[footnote 35]

When children and young people talked to us about online sexual abuse, they did not use the terms that government guidance did. It can be difficult to address issues when the definitions are not up to date or are grouped unhelpfully. For example, 'Keeping children safe in education' uses the phrase 'sexting' for online sexual abuse. None of the children and young people we spoke to used this phrase and it appears to be out of date. In any future updates of government guidance, the full range of children and young people's experiences should be reflected in the language used. Clearer categories of the types of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse would also be helpful for professionals.

What did children, young people and professionals tell us about sexual abuse outside school?

Children and young people in several schools told us that harmful sexual behaviour happens at house parties, without adults present, and that alcohol and drugs are often involved. In one school, leaders talked about parties that have happened when parents have left children and young people unsupervised and they 'are allowed to see, do and hear what they want'. In another, governors talked about a culture of 'affluent neglect' and leaders said that some parents bought alcohol for their children to have at parties when they were away. It is important to note, however, that incidents of harmful sexual behaviour or unhealthy cultures were certainly not confined to 'affluent' children or young people.

An analysis of key words in the 2,030 publicly available testimonies on the Everyone's Invited website found that a third (670) mentioned drugs or alcohol. Of these, words equating to 'drunk', 'party', alcohol or names of different types of alcohol and 'drinking' featured in the most testimonies.[footnote 36] These findings should be treated with caution as they are not representative. They do, however, give an insight into the experiences of some children and young people.

Some children, young people and leaders also identified parks as places where sexual harassment and violence took place.

In a minority of schools, children, young people and leaders talked specifically about cultural factors that contributed to boys' harmful sexual

behaviour. One Year 12 boy talking about other boys told inspectors: ‘Essentially, they only spend time with boys, then hit puberty and start going to parties with booze and drugs and girls, and they don’t know how to handle it. And some of the boys are very wealthy and have never been told “no” before.’ In another school, girls similarly told inspectors that some of the boys had a sense of entitlement and had never ‘been told no’. They talked about a sense of ‘male superiority’ in the school. In another school, children and young people said that harmful sexual behaviours occurred outside school at parties but that victims did not want to disclose it because of the ‘power and money culture’ within which they live. As one girl put it, ‘victims do not want to commit social or career suicide’. These findings point to the power dynamics that are often present where there are sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. These dynamics and social hierarchies are present across all school types.

Not many children and young people spoke about sexual abuse in relationships, although in one school they mentioned that incidents sometimes occurred between peers in established relationships, where ‘things go too far’ or ‘go over the line’. Some children and young people also talked about wanting to know more about issues around consent in established relationships. Textual analysis of the publicly available testimonies on the Everyone’s Invited website indicates that, where a relationship to the perpetrator is named, around two thirds of the testimonies say that the perpetrator was known to them and around a fifth was a boyfriend.[footnote 37] Evidence suggests that early experience of dating and relationship violence is associated with subsequent adverse outcomes, such as suicidal behaviours, other mental health problems and low educational attainment.[footnote 38]

Girls talked about feeling uncomfortable because of behaviour from peers on bus journeys (including school buses), where they said they experienced the kind of sexual harassment and bullying behaviour that happened in school. Girls in one school, for example, said that boys often made ‘rape jokes’ on the school bus. More widely, some children and young people said they did not feel safe from strangers on trains or in parks, alleys, car parks and side streets. Some girls in particular said that feeling unsafe in these situations was pervasive. One girl said that a man had deliberately brushed her younger sister’s leg recently and another girl had told her sister to get used to it as ‘this is what happens’. Younger girls aged 12 to 13 in another school said that they felt uncomfortable walking through town in their uniforms. Evidence from other research also indicates that this is an issue. A recent survey of girls and young women aged 13 to 21 found that more than half have felt unsafe walking home alone and had experienced harassment or know someone who has, and nearly half feel unsafe using public transport.[footnote 39]

How does the current system of safeguarding listen to the voices of children and young people?

In this section, we outline what children and young people told us about why they do not speak to adults about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. We also share the practices that we identified in schools that both enable and act as barriers to children and young people telling adults about their experiences.

On our visits, we found that children and young people rarely speak to adults about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, even though they told us that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are prevalent in their daily lives.

The reasons why children and young people significantly under-report sexual abuse are well documented. Although research indicates that one of the main reasons for this is a misplaced sense of shame and embarrassment, there are many other complex factors at play. For example, children and young people may have a fear of social exclusion by peers, worry about how adults will react, and feel that once they talk about abuse, the next steps will be out of their control.[footnote 40] Research also indicates that children and young people are even less likely to tell someone about abuse when it is perpetrated by peers.[footnote 41]

Research indicates that, even when some children and young people attempt to tell someone about abuse, they are not always listened to or believed. For example, NSPCC research on young adults who experienced abuse and family violence as a child found that 80% had to make more than one attempt to tell someone about the abuse before they were listened to and taken seriously. Ninety per cent of the young people who told someone had a negative experience at some point, mostly where those they told had not responded appropriately.[footnote 42] Our joint targeted area inspection into child sexual abuse in the family also found that some groups of children, such as boys, disabled children and children from some minority ethnic groups face greater barriers to talking about abuse and are less likely be believed when they do.[footnote 43] The 'Beyond referrals' research into harmful sexual behaviour in schools found that, even where schools had provided a range of ways for children and young people to talk to staff about peer abuse, there remained significant barriers to them reporting abuse.[footnote 44]

On our visits, we found that professionals still rely too much on children telling someone about abuse instead of recognising other indicators, such as emotional or behavioural changes. We also found this in our joint targeted area inspection on the theme of child sexual abuse in the family.

In some schools we visited, teachers recognised that they needed to do much more than rely on children and young people's verbal reports of sexual violence or sexual harassment, including online. In these schools, they had taken steps to create a culture where it is clear what acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is for staff, children and young people. Teachers were encouraged to log indicators of concern on a centralised recording system so that DSLs could 'build a picture' and decide whether further investigation was required.

Professionals' and victims' groups we spoke to also said that it is rare that children and young people talk about abuse as a 'one-off' and that this may be a process that happens over time. Victims' groups we spoke to also considered that children and young people are much more likely to talk about abuse when secure and trusting relationships have been developed within a supportive culture.

Who, if anyone, do children and young people talk to about sexual harassment and violence?

Most children and young people we surveyed told us they would feel able to tell someone about their experiences of sexual harassment or sexual violence, including online (either inside or outside school). In order of most likely to least likely, they said they would tell:

- a friend
- a parent or carer
- another family member
- an adult at their school or college
- the police
- a helpline/charity
- someone else, including a social worker, coach or religious leader

Most of the children and young people said they would feel most comfortable talking to friends, something that was also highlighted in our discussions with victims' groups. This emphasises the importance of schools teaching acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, with clear guidance and support, so that children and young people can support each other to bring issues to trusted adults.

The children and young people we asked said that, if they were to talk to an adult, it would be a parent or someone in their family. Lower numbers of children and young people said they would talk to adults in their school. When children and young people said they would talk to someone in school about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, they tended

to identify senior staff. Research indicates that when children and young people do tell a professional about these issues, it is most likely to be a teacher or leader at their school.[footnote 45] This highlights the importance of training leaders and teachers on good practice in this area and supporting children to bring issues to trusted adults. It also shows that taking time to build trusting relationships with children and young people can help them talk about abuse.

Inspectors found that, in more than half of the schools they visited, procedures were clear and safeguarding teams were visible and known to children and young people. Children and young people were aware of the procedure for reporting concerns and, in this respect, schools were supporting them to tell them about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse. However, staff, children and young people told us that, even with this good practice, children and young people do not always report incidents for a variety of reasons.

This illustrates that schools cannot rely on children talking about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online abuse. Just having clear procedures and visible staff are not sufficient to support children and young people to talk about these issues.

What prevents children and learners from reporting sexual harassment and violence?

Children and young people in the surveys and focus groups told us that there is a range of barriers that prevent them from talking about sexual abuse and harassment, including online. These included:

- worry that what happened next would be out of their control
- worry that they would be branded by their peers as a ‘snitch’ who got a peer into trouble
- worry that they would be ostracised from friendship groups
- worry that there would be damage to their reputation, for example through sexual rumours being circulated about them
- feeling that they would not be believed
- feeling that they might be blamed for doing things they were told not to do, for example sending nudes, even if they were pressured to do so
- feeling that nothing would be done
- feeling that things were so commonplace ‘there’s no point’ in raising it
- feeling embarrassment and shame when talking to someone from a different generation about sex

The most common reason that the children and young people who answered our survey gave for not reporting an experience was not knowing what would happen next. Victims' groups also told us that a poor response by professionals can leave children and young people feeling out of control. In one school, the DSL was aware of this issue and had educated children and young people about what would happen if they told someone about abuse, emphasising how children's best interests were at the heart of any investigation. In the same school, the DSL took the time to develop a trusting relationship with a victim of sexual violence. This helped the victim get to the point where they could talk about the incident fully to the school, the police and other multi-agency partners.

In focus groups, children and young people told us that deciding whether to report an incident depends on the perceived severity of the incident. For example, children and young people thought they would be listened to if they reported 'serious' incidents but would be less likely to report what they see as 'common' incidents, such as 'being asked for nudes' and 'comments from boys in corridors'. This is largely because they feel that some of the incidents are so commonplace 'there's no point' reporting them. Some forms of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse have become so normalised for children that they do not see the point in reporting and challenging this behaviour.

Some children and young people talked about previous incidents that have been reported, which in their view had 'come to nothing'. Consequently, they did not believe that the school would do anything if they did report abuse, especially if incidents took place outside school. Some DSLs told us that, at times, this view was compounded when criminal investigations did not lead to a prosecution or conviction. DSLs also told us that the confidential nature of investigations left some victims or children and young people perceiving that 'nothing had been done'. Again, this led to them thinking that there was little point in telling someone about abuse.

Schools and multi-agency partners need to strike the right balance. Over-criminalisation of children and young people is not desirable or helpful. This means that, when dealing with peer-on-peer abuse, multi-agency partners, including the police, may decide to provide intervention and support for the perpetrator. They may find this the best way of preventing further abuse, instead of criminalising the child. However, this can sometimes lead to the victim feeling that agencies have not responded appropriately. Furthermore, as safeguarding investigations must be confidential, it can also feel to some children and young people as though nothing has been done, when in reality action has been taken.

Our visits found that, in a minority of schools, there were unhealthy cultures that prevented children and young people from talking to adults about sexual harassment and online sexual abuse. They did not think anything would be done as a result. In these schools, many children and young people talked about not being believed. They also thought that teachers

were willing to condone sexualised name-calling and harassment. Worryingly, one governor reported that ‘blokeish banter’ was just part of growing up. This is in line with previous research on the topic, where children and young people reported that some teachers dismiss sexual harassment as ‘banter’ or ‘messing around’.[footnote 46], [footnote 47]

Reputational damage and social consequences

In more than half of schools, children and young people said worry about ‘reputational damage’, for example being ostracised from a social group or damage to a sexual reputation, stopped them reporting. They were also worried about being labelled as a ‘snitch’ who got their peers into trouble. Some said that by the time incidents were shared on social media it was too late for leaders to address reputational damage. As one pupil put it, although leaders were trying to help, they ‘wouldn’t be able to – it’d be too late’. Feedback from victims’ groups also supported this finding.

In these discussions, it was clear that, while their sense of embarrassment and shame was a common reason for not reporting, children and young people also weighed up other complex issues. This included the social consequences for them if they did report, relative to the severity of the incident. Previous research on this topic identified that, when children and young people did talk about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, this resulted in social isolation and the victim being stigmatised and harassed by peers.[footnote 48]

Some children and young people had a clear desire for justice, but this was at odds with others who told us that harsh sanctions for their peers put them off talking to an adult about abuse. These children and young people told us that sometimes the consequences of reporting abuse have been so ‘punitive’ for the perpetrator that, rather than acting as a ‘deterrent’ to harmful sexual behaviour, the result is to ‘put off’ children and young people from reporting incidents. They were also worried about police involvement. They said that they would prefer a pastoral and supportive approach without the immediate threat of police involvement.

Some children and young people told us that their perceptions of the behaviour policy can be a barrier to reporting incidents to staff if, in their view, the policy is ‘unfair’. These children and young people do not feel confident that staff would ‘deal with things sensitively’. Some said that school leaders are not as interested in their ‘personal well-being’ as they are in the ‘outward appearances’ of the school.

This highlights the complexity for schools and multi-agency partnerships in managing peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. Children and young people need to feel confident that staff will

respond in a proportionate and fair way to incidents. They also need to be told the different potential consequences of reporting. Schools need to have a range of responses to different forms of behaviour and intervene in a proportionate way at the right time.

We are aware of some research that explores how schools tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online.[footnote 49] However, the terms of reference of this review did not include a consideration of which systems of consequences deter children and young people from future harmful sexual behaviour. It is an area that warrants further research.

We recognise that it can be challenging for school leaders to get their approach right and that, sometimes, what children and young people say they want is not necessarily in line with what statutory guidance requires. Schools are often the place that parents, children and young people turn to first in cases of sexual violence before going to the police. Professionals must follow statutory guidance. But they also have a responsibility to explain to children and young people what will happen if they do report abuse. Better dialogue in schools about the different forms of behaviours and likely responses to such behaviours may mean children feel better informed to make decisions about reporting. Ultimately, it is for schools (with the support of multi-agency partners where relevant) to decide the appropriate course of action.

Reaction from adults and worry about what would happen next

Some children and young people told us that they felt that if they did tell an adult about abuse, they could be ‘blamed or not taken seriously’. These children and young people were worried that they would be judged and would feel embarrassed by the inevitable questioning.

Being blamed or parents finding out were the third and fourth most common reasons that children and young people who answered our survey gave for not talking about harmful sexual behaviour. In the focus groups, they said being worried about their parents finding out would be a reason for them not to talk to an adult about abuse. This was especially the case where drugs and alcohol were involved. Some also said that they feared they would be blamed for doing something they had explicitly been told not to do, for example sending nudes, even when they had been pressured into doing so. They were also worried they would have to show images to staff members and that they would feel embarrassed and ashamed when talking to someone from a different generation about sex.

These findings emphasise the need for adults, including parents, to be better educated and informed about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, between peers. It is also vital that adults are supported by professionals to provide appropriate, non-judgemental responses to children and young people who talk about abuse. Children and young people need reassurance and open discussion in schools about what they can expect, and what will happen if they do need to report concerns. They also need trusted adults they can talk to.

Understanding confidentiality

Pupils' concerns about confidentiality can be a barrier to reporting. Children and young people know that schools cannot always keep everything confidential and may need to share information with other agencies. But they want assurance that there are some things that are 'not to be passed on'. Children and young people do not always know 'what will be done with the information'. They are also worried that responses such as a whole-school assembly would just set the 'rumour mills going' and could undermine the anonymity of those involved.

While all the professionals we spoke to highlighted the need for confidentiality when a child reports sexual harassment and/or violence, including online abuse, some children and young people gave examples of how they could be made aware that an investigation was ongoing. As one pupil put it, 'sometimes if you report something in school everybody quickly knows about it. A teacher takes you out of a lesson. Everyone is like, "What was that about?" when you come back into the classroom'. Confidentiality may also be compromised if a pupil speaks to a friend first, as many told us they would, or if an incident is shared on social media before the child or young person has spoken to an adult about it.

In light of this, all schools should take a whole-school approach to tackling sexual harassment and online sexual abuse because it is likely that they are underestimating the scale of the problem. This should include speaking to children, and listening to their views and experiences and using these to inform a preventative approach to sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse.

What does good practice look like?

There are several good practice models that encourage children and young people to tell someone about abuse. The 'Beyond referrals' project includes several recommendations to help schools develop an environment where

children and young people can talk to professionals about abuse. These recommendations include:

- engaging students in small-group sessions to discuss different forms of harmful sexual behaviour
- mapping the school and out-of-school spaces to identify where harmful sexual behaviour takes place
- using a curriculum-based approach to tackle a culture where reporting is perceived as 'snitching'[footnote 50]

The project also highlights the following as important:

- children having a trusting and positive relationship with an individual staff member
- children being aware of previous positive experiences of school responses
- teachers showing that they respect students, listen and respond subtly
- having staff with a specialist role not linked to teaching or behaviour

This last point was raised by some children and young people on our visits. They were worried that they would get into trouble if they spoke to the DSL when this individual had a dual role as the deputy headteacher for behaviour. Some schools we visited countered this by having a small number of trained staff who can deal with safeguarding matters in collaboration with the DSLs. However, we recognise that in some schools, especially small ones, it is not possible to manage this. Schools should consider the DSL's role carefully, including how children and young people may perceive it. They should try to avoid any negative associations that might compound children's misplaced sense of shame, embarrassment or 'being in trouble'.

The NSPCC has also developed guidance for professionals to support children and young people when they talk about abuse. This highlights the importance of:

- demonstrating to a child that you are listening
- putting a child in charge of the conversation
- reassuring a child and showing empathy[footnote 51]

The recent guidance from the UK Council for Internet Safety outlines some good practice in dealing specifically with incidents of youth-produced sexual imagery.[footnote 52]

In our visits, we found promising practice that places the voices of children and young people at the heart of the approach to safeguarding. For example, one school had held 'listening events' to help children and young people share worries and speak to adults in a safe environment. Another

school used an anonymous questionnaire to ask children and young people what the issues for their age group were and what language they used when discussing sexual harassment and online sexual abuse. Responses were built into staff training and helped build a culture where children and young people, leaders and teachers had a shared understanding of what sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, were. One leader explained:

> “ So often, nobody is talking to young people about these things – including or especially their parents. These conversations are awkward so there has almost been a tacit agreement not to have them. This means that we risk not knowing what young people do, or think, and how what they do is affecting them.”

In some schools, we also found evidence of how RSHE lessons had helped children and young people’s understanding of these issues. This had led to a culture where children and young people felt able to talk to someone about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, or to raise concerns about their peers. The victims’ groups we spoke to also outlined the importance of creating this kind of supportive and open culture.

In some schools, leaders were reflecting on the testimonies on the Everyone’s Invited website to critically evaluate and strengthen their processes. For example, in one school, there was a ‘changing the narrative’ pupil group. The group sensitively gathered information from other children and young people, talked about issues and informed leaders of their findings. In another school, leaders were trialling different reporting methods such as private messages through Teams chat. There was a whole-school approach to educating children and young people and encouraging them to come forward, delivered through assemblies, tutor time, posters and leaflets. They were also actively engaging parents and alumni to discuss concerns and address them where possible.

While it is too early for leaders to talk about the impact of such initiatives, children and young people in these schools told us that they can see that leaders are trying to respond in positive ways to the Everyone’s Invited testimonies. They told us that they feel confident in talking about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, when there is a positive and open school culture.

To what extent do schools know about sexual abuse? When they do know, how do they respond?

In this section, we outline schools' understanding of the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, and how they respond when they do know about it. We also share what approaches schools are taking to tackle these issues and where there are still gaps.

Responding to incidents

There were many examples where incidents of sexual violence were dealt with appropriately and school policies and statutory guidance such as 'Keeping children safe in education' were informing practice. Examples of practice in these schools often included:

- involving other agencies where appropriate
- providing support for all children and young people involved (victims and perpetrators) through pastoral teams and professional counselling
- informing and working with parents

However, our visits highlighted some inconsistencies in responses where professionals had interpreted guidance differently. There was also variability in DSLs' understanding of which incidents needed be referred to the police and children's social care, meaning that some historical incidents that should have been referred were not. Some of the schools in our visits used different mechanisms to strengthen their own decision-making processes. For example, they were part of wider networks of DSLs or would call on the local authority to 'sense check' decisions when unsure.

In around two fifths of the schools visited, inspectors noted that leaders had recently adapted either their safeguarding protocols, systems for monitoring or staff training on harmful sexual behaviours. This was in reaction to the Everyone's Invited website.

As we outlined earlier, many professionals tended to underestimate the scale of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse. DSLs and leaders in schools assessed the extent of the problem more accurately than teachers, although they acknowledged that reported incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online were the 'tip of the iceberg', as one DSL put it.

Furthermore, some schools were dealing with incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, in an isolated way, without considering the context and wider safeguarding risks. This meant that they were not considering factors such as:

- whether other children and young people were at risk

- whether there were spaces in or outside school where children and young people were at particular risk
- where power dynamics in peer relationships were creating unhealthy cultures

In these schools, incidents were dealt with reactively instead of proactively. In some cases, we found evidence that behaviours were not monitored well enough following an incident.

In addition, in about a quarter of schools, sexual harassment such as inappropriate sexualised language was not always addressed and identified early enough. In other instances where school leaders were aware of the problem, there was a limited and ineffective response to support children with this issue. Children and young people reported to inspectors that this behaviour had become normalised in their schools.

In one positive example, a group of girls raised issues with the headteacher after the Sarah Everard case about the normalisation of harmful sexual behaviour, which they felt needed to be addressed. Leaders updated the RSHE curriculum following this. The girls reported that, since this intervention, there had been a reduction in unwanted sexual language. The boys in this school also said they appreciated the changes to the curriculum and would like more time to discuss these kind of issues as they are so important.

Recent government advice for those in education on how to tackle the sharing of nudes and semi-nudes talks specifically about how individual case management impacts on school-wide culture:[footnote 53]

> “ Individual incidents of peer abuse and sexual behaviour (the sharing of nudes and semi-nudes can fall under this category) can lead to unhealthy or damaging cultures within the school community. How these incidents – including incidents of ‘low level’ harmful sexual behaviour – are responded to directly affects the culture of the school. If handled poorly, an unsafe and unhealthy set of norms can be created which enable peer-on-peer abuse and this can also prevent other children and young people from disclosing. It must be recognised that the individual case management can affect school-wide culture, peer response and all children’s ability to speak out.”

The government’s expectation of schools and colleges and how they should respond to all forms of sexual harassment and violence is clearly set out in advice and guidance.[footnote 54] Ofsted has also previously written about peer-on-peer abuse and how education providers should respond.[footnote 55]

It is a concern that this review has identified that many instances of sexual harassment, including the pressure to share nudes and the sharing of youth-produced sexual imagery without consent, are going unrecognised or unchallenged by school staff. We are especially concerned that for some

children and young people this is so commonplace that they see no point in raising it as a concern with staff.

How schools perceive their responsibility in the context of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse

Schools are in a difficult position when it comes to navigating responsibility and subsequent decisions when there is an incident of harmful sexual behaviour that occurs between peers outside school. When they are made aware of incidents, schools have a duty to inform multi-agency partners and work with them to prevent further abuse and ensure that children and young people are safe. In the schools we visited, it was clear that schools were following the guidance in this respect.

However, some leaders talked to us about how hard it is to take decisions when investigations are ongoing over a significant period of time or when the police do not have the basis to act. They reported feeling left with difficult decisions to make, such as whether to separate the peers when criminal investigations did not lead to a prosecution or conviction.

Leaders in some schools said they were unclear about the scope of their safeguarding responsibilities and about how and when they could intervene. They reported some of the challenges they faced as:

- supporting children and young people to trust professionals enough to talk about harmful sexual behaviour that happened outside school
- parents' lack of understanding about what their children were doing outside school
- their ability to protect children and young people outside school, for example when parties take place with parents' consent and incidents happen there
- the role of exclusion when there has been a serious incident of sexual violence and how this intersects with any criminal investigation and action (some leaders say that this has caused them great anxiety and further guidance on it would be welcome)
- how they could help children and young people to be safe when using rapidly changing social media outside school

While recognising these challenges, it is interesting to note the different approaches of some school leaders. Clearly, if children are at risk, whether within or outside the school gates, schools have a responsibility to work with multi-agency partners to share information where appropriate and refer children on for support and protection. However, it is important to note that,

while sometimes multi-agency work may continue, the ‘aftermath’ of any investigation is often left with school leaders, who have little guidance to support their decision-making. Some leaders also talked about how difficult it was to make effective decisions when police and other lengthy multi-agency investigations were ongoing.

In-school approaches to address sexual harassment and violence

In the schools we visited, leaders told us that they used a wide variety of sanctions for perpetrators of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse. They intended these to be proportionate and to take account of individual circumstances. Examples included fixed-term exclusions, detentions, internal referrals and removal of privileges. Schools also included parents and carers as part of any response. Some children and young people were moved permanently to a different class or form. Some leaders said they found it more difficult to issue sanctions for incidents taking place outside school than inside school because they consider that their behaviour policy does not apply to these incidents.

Some children and young people, particularly girls, believe that sanctions are often not tough enough or that the wrong person is sanctioned. In one school, for example, girls felt that boys who pressured others to send ‘nudes’ were punished less than the girls who sent the images. In another, girls felt that the lack of severe sanctions meant that the harmful sexual behaviour continued. This suggests that, in some schools, the threat of being caught and punished is a much weaker influence on behaviour than an underlying culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse can thrive. In some schools, inspectors noted that children and young people did not seem to know enough about the range of sanctions that could be used and that this seemed to affect children and young people’s willingness to talk to adults about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse.

In addition to sanctions, many schools told us that they offered support to the victim and the perpetrator to prevent future incidents and tackle any underlying causes of harmful sexual behaviour. This included counselling, pastoral support, educative approaches and the involvement of families, social care and external agencies, such as child and adolescent mental health services and specialist services. Many schools recognised the importance of family involvement and the need to support parents and carers. In some schools, leaders said they would appreciate more support services for perpetrators of harmful sexual behaviour, especially at an early stage, when inappropriate and problematic behaviours are first identified.

The extent to which leaders evaluate whether sanctions and/or interventions are effective varies, as does the evidence of ongoing monitoring of children and young people who have perpetrated harmful sexual behaviour. For example, in one school, records state that perpetrators should have received education following an incident. But there was no evidence that this happened or what the content was. In other schools, leaders reported checking regularly with victims and perpetrators to ensure that support systems were having the desired effect.

Staff training and development

Most staff receive annual safeguarding training, which includes updates on 'Keeping children safe in education'. This training aims to ensure that staff understand the latest guidance, and there were examples where it included an understanding of different forms of harmful sexual behaviour.

In most schools we visited, leaders understood the continuum of harmful sexual behaviours, but not all of them appeared to have shared this understanding with all staff. For example, only a handful of schools had provided detailed training for staff on the continuum of harmful sexual behaviour and how to address the context behind incidents of harmful sexual behaviour, such as peer group dynamics or unsupervised spaces where poor behaviour occurred. Where this training was in place, it was part of a wider school ethos and long-term strategy for preventing abuse. Evidence from previous research indicates that this is the most effective way to tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. [footnote 56]

Most staff training on harmful sexual behaviours tended to be piecemeal. This was often because it was incorporated into training on other important aspects of safeguarding. For example, in one school, information on peer-on-peer abuse was confined to one slide in a much longer presentation on safeguarding. In a few schools, there was no training on peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. These schools expected staff to read the guidance instead.

It is important that, in any school, governors have a good understanding of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, so that they can provide the right level of support and challenge for school leaders and DSLs. In just over a quarter of the schools we visited, inspectors reported that governors had some sort of safeguarding training, although it was not always clear that this included specific training on harmful sexual behaviour. Evidence indicates that there are gaps in governors' knowledge of online safety issues in particular.[footnote 57] Around a quarter of the schools we visited had a specific safeguarding governor, and some of those met regularly with the DSL. In around a third of the schools, inspectors

highlighted that governors are involved in reviewing incidents, safeguarding logs, behaviour logs or procedures related to harmful sexual behaviour. This could be to help identify wider patterns, or to check that school policies and procedures have been adhered to. Our visits indicate that governors could receive better training and be more involved in tackling harmful sexual behaviours.

Training and development for DSLs

Being a DSL requires regular training and additional support to help with the emotional impact of the role and the expertise that is required. In some schools, we saw good practice. DSLs were engaging fully with the LSPs and forming support networks locally with other DSLs. They had protected time on timetables, opportunities for supervision and regular training from LSPs. However, some DSLs talked about a lack of high-level training at LSP level in how to address, manage and follow up on allegations of a serious sexual nature.

Some DSLs said it was hard to keep up with guidance, and that publishing updates before the summer holidays instead of September would allow them to plan staff inset days in September accordingly. The Home Office's 'Tackling child sexual abuse strategy' includes a commitment from the DfE to provide high-quality resources on addressing child sexual abuse.[footnote 58] These will be held on a digital support platform for DSLs. Once released, this should help to upskill professionals and help with some of the training needs that DSLs identified.

Learning from incidents

Inspectors noted there were inconsistencies in how staff were defining and recording instances of sexual abuse, including recording of discussions with multi-agency partners and the outcome of referrals. Without an agreed and shared system of recording, schools are limiting their ability to track and monitor concerns and appropriately plan their response to sexual harassment and violence in order to reduce risk. Some schools had systems in place for recording incidents, but they did not all then analyse the data and information to identify any patterns or trends that could inform their response.

A few schools had enhanced systems in place to record concerns and track patterns of behaviour. These, together with systems to gather information about pupils' concerns, for example through surveys, gave schools a better understanding and oversight of issues. DSLs were able to build a better

picture of low-level changes in behaviour or incidents that may indicate a response is required, either at pupil, peer group or school level, instead of just referring on to multi-agency partners. These schools used the RSHE curriculum and assemblies, for example, to address concerning patterns of behaviour.

How are schools successfully delivering the new RSHE curriculum and how can they be supported further?

The terms of reference of this review asked us to consider the new RSHE curriculum. However, the disruption of the last year means that schools' ability to plan and deliver the new curriculum will have been significantly affected. Most children and young people talked about their previous experience of RSHE and PSHE, which we know does not necessarily address how the curriculum will support them in future. Where we can, we point to how schools and colleges are implementing the new RSHE curriculum and where they can be supported further. The DfE's research into schools that adopted the RSHE curriculum early also provides insights. [footnote 59] We recognise that RSHE is just one part of a whole-school approach to tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. Other factors, and the role of parents, are also vital.

Our visits identified a number of issues that meant that children and young people were not getting the quality of education in this subject that they should be. These included weak implementation of RSHE, poor teacher subject knowledge, and significant gaps in curriculum coverage. The children and young people we spoke to were seldom positive about their RSHE and PSHE lessons. They felt that the quality of the input varied according to who was teaching them and that the lessons were not relevant to their daily experiences and the reality of their lives. Some teachers also talked about not feeling prepared to teach outside their subject specialism and receiving resources too late to prepare for sessions.

In half of the schools visited, leaders had developed an RSHE curriculum. This commonly involved expertise from a trained RSHE/PSHE lead in planning and organising the curriculum. Inspectors viewed detailed planning in these schools that showed clear examples of a strong curriculum narrative. Emphasis was placed on the importance of respect and prioritised teaching about consent and healthy relationships. Concepts were generally sequenced and interwoven in an 'age and stage' manner, allowing for content to be revisited and built on in further depth at appropriate points in children and young people's learning. Many leaders spoke knowledgeably about the content of their RSHE curriculum.

However, inspectors also noted that in many of these schools, despite a well-planned curriculum, there were often constraints in place that impacted on its implementation. Similar to our findings in other subjects,[footnote 60] some of the main weaknesses in the delivery of RSHE were linked to the lack of subject knowledge that teachers had on topics like consent, healthy relationships and sharing of sexual images.

In a few schools, planning was almost non-existent. Leaders did not value the importance of the subject. In others, leaders were confident in the delivery of some areas of PSHE, such as cyber-bullying and respecting differences, but were less assured when it came to including relationships and sex education. This meant that, in many of these schools, teachers were not teaching about consent, healthy relationships and the use of sexual imagery. These findings reflect the picture from our last PSHE subject survey.[footnote 61] In that report, we found some schools focused on the mechanics of reproduction and not enough on understanding healthy sexual relationships.

In a few schools, teaching about sexual relationships was covered in science or, in faith schools, religious education lessons, but this did not commonly address same-sex relationships. Some children and young people noted that RSHE lessons were not inclusive enough and only focused on heterosexual relationships. In a few schools, planning was piecemeal. Inspectors found that these schools treated it as a tick-box process to ensure that some coverage was provided over all the statutory requirements. It is a concern that in a few schools, children and young people told us that they had learned more about sexuality ‘from social media than from school’ or had got their education about relationships from their peers and social media.

In around half of the schools, teachers, who were often expected to deliver content through tutorial time, had not received any formal training on RSHE. Several teachers reported that resources for the lesson were sent late, sometimes too late for them to look through fully before having to teach the lesson. Others expressed resentment that they had to teach relationships and sex education beyond their own subject specialism. As children and young people from the focus groups suggested:

> “ It’s like a task that teachers have to do, they don’t take it seriously, so it’s not a good environment to learn about it. How can any of us take it seriously if they don’t? You can tell they don’t want to do the PowerPoint. It’s always stuff we’ve done before anyway.”

This meant they were less keen to discuss sensitive issues and speak to them about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. They were unsure what the reactions of less confident teachers would be.

Many leaders confirmed that staff were generally not very confident to deliver the curriculum in areas related to sexual harassment and sexual

violence, including online. On this basis, there was in-school variation in the consistency of how RSHE was delivered. Children and young people from the same schools reported both positive and negative experiences, depending on teachers' level of subject knowledge and confidence. These findings indicate that additional resources to support non-subject specialists to teach RSHE would be beneficial for schools to help them successfully implement the new RSHE curriculum.

In some schools, leaders did not regularly or systematically check on the effectiveness and impact of teaching. This meant they were unaware that some staff lacked knowledge or confidence in delivering content. Leaders also did not seek feedback from children and young people. This left them unaware that children and young people were not getting the rich discussion required to fully understand complex concepts, such as consent.

In some of the schools with a more secure curriculum plan, leaders tended to alleviate this variation in teachers' expertise by allocating discrete curriculum time to RSHE, rather than delivering it through a class tutor system. Leaders in these schools had carefully considered which staff should deliver the RSHE curriculum and provided appropriate training, rather than placing expectations on all staff. They also invited trusted external speakers with specialist knowledge to talk to children and young people and delivered aspects of the curriculum through assemblies. However, some mentioned that aligning speakers' availability with the curriculum was tricky. One school also used external speakers to hold remote sessions on aspects of the RSHE curriculum for parents, carers and their children.

Some leaders told us that finding space in the timetable for RSHE was problematic. The actual hours set aside for it were sometimes minimal and did not meet the requirements set out in the curriculum plan to teach content fully. Therefore, teachers and tutors often struggled to cover the curriculum in the detail in which it had been planned. Several children and young people also identified that the time planned for RSHE was not always valued, particularly by some teachers, and was often 'taken for other things'. This was particularly the case for older children and young people who had other pressures, such as revision or catch-up interventions.

Children and young people were generally concerned that the curriculum did not take account of their level of maturity. They felt that they could deal with more challenging content than teachers realised. This was particularly raised as an issue in the teaching of issues around consent. Older children and young people accepted that teaching about consent through analogies made sense in younger years. But this became jarring and patronising for them when the same or similar content was repeated in their later years of school. Some said that the popular 'cup of tea' consent video could only go so far.

Year 6 pupils we spoke to had a good understanding of friendships and relationships. However, in one faith school, the Year 6 children said they were taught about being a good friend in an indirect way (through religious teachings) and would value something more direct.

When planning the RSHE curriculum, it is essential that schools work closely with parents and carers to talk them through areas covered, address any gaps in their understanding and equip them with the confidence to be able to have open discussions with their children. Research indicates that there is a particular gap in parents' understanding of issues around online sexual abuse. Many parents are interested in learning more about the issue through schools and online resources. They also want more support in understanding how to talk about these issues with their children.[footnote 62]

How well are multi-agency safeguarding arrangements working?

We held discussions with 12 LSPs to seek their views on how well multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to tackle sexual harassment and violence were working between LSPs, schools and colleges. We did not review the work of the LSPs as part of this thematic review. This section reflects their views, alongside the views of school and college leaders.

Some LSPs we spoke to took a strategic approach to tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. For some, this was part of wider work on peer-on-peer abuse and extra-familial safeguarding. These LSPs reported that they had been working closely with schools and colleges to collate and analyse data on sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. They could speak fluently about the experiences of children and young people, ranging from criminal cases to sexual harassment. They reported working closely with schools and colleges through the multi-agency audits and had systems in place to understand children and young people's experiences. They were aware that some of these issues were so common that may become somewhat normalised, a view that was also supported by the victims' groups we spoke to.

However, not all LSPs took this approach. A small number of LSPs told us that sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, in schools and colleges were not significant problems for children and young people in their area. It was not clear whether this was because a clear assessment had been made or because they were underestimating the problems. Given what children and young people have told us about the prevalence of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse in their lives, it is likely to be the latter.

We were presented with a mixed picture of partnership working from schools, colleges and LSPs. There were examples of LSPs reporting effective engagement with a range of schools and colleges, including local authority, academy, independent and faith schools. But this was not the case in all areas. LSPs told us that some schools and colleges do not always engage as fully with them as they are required to as a 'relevant agency'. For example, LSPs reported that independent schools may commission outside training rather than accessing partnership training, which makes it hard for them to know and understand what is being delivered in these schools and harder for the schools to link into an early help offer. Some LSPs also reported that independent schools may be less likely to complete audits commissioned by the LSP. They described this as a 'significant barrier' to their ability to have oversight of safeguarding practices in these schools, and to provide support where it is needed. However, some LSPs did report effective working relationships with independent schools as a result of proactive and persistent strategic partnership arrangements.

Some schools and colleges have reported to us, in previous inspections and as part of these visits, that they struggle to engage with LSPs and get the support they need. This may be why some are choosing to commission training elsewhere. One DSL at an independent single-sex school we spoke to also emphasised that while a network of other DSLs in the LSP was helpful more broadly, it was particularly useful to be part of a network of DSLs from other corresponding single-sex independent schools in the local area to help identify patterns and trends of behaviour and intervene early.

In the current guidance, once the LSP names a school or college as a 'relevant agency', that places the school or college under a duty to cooperate with the LSP arrangements. However, some LSPs raised concerns that changes to 'Working together to safeguard children' did not make clear how the engagement of schools and colleges as 'relevant agencies' should work in practice. They were concerned that leaving LSPs to reach their own conclusions on how best locally to engage individual institutions was too vague. Therefore, the wording in the statutory guidance could be made more explicit so that it clearly outlines the relationship between LSPs and schools and colleges, and their individual responsibilities.

Both LSPs and some DSLs said that centralised training for DSLs from LSPs was useful. They used this training to then train others in schools and colleges on how to identify and address sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. They also identified training and meetings as being routes for helping schools/colleges to develop a preventative approach. LSPs also highlighted the importance of DSLs having enough time and support from school and college leaders to enable them to engage in partnership planning, training and meetings.

Where arrangements were working well, LSPs found that they provide a forum for the sharing of information, such as patterns and trends in

emerging local risks to children and young people. This can then inform clear preventative approaches within individual schools and colleges that take account of local risks. Some of the schools and colleges we spoke to also talked about how helpful their LSP and local authority were, not just for helping with specific cases, but also for the training and networks they provided.

However, some school and college leaders told us it was a challenge for them to access the right information or support from multi-agency partners as it can vary across local authorities. Some also mentioned the difficulties of having different thresholds across different areas. This becomes a particular challenge when their school or college population comes from a wide area, such as schools in London, independent schools and some faith schools. LSPs also recognised that it was important that schools and colleges had clear support from them on how to manage sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. They recognised that it was their responsibility to ensure that school and college leaders are supported to understand local thresholds and pathways for referral into services.

Is the existing safeguarding framework and guidance for inspectors strong enough to properly assess how schools and colleges safeguard and promote the welfare of children?

Inspection is a critical lever in the accountability system. It provides a ‘point in time’ snapshot of an education provider, including its approach to tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. Inspection evidence can be aggregated to provide insights at a system level and to influence behaviour. While it provides broad assurance, the inspection model is not designed or resourced to investigate or address specific incidents in schools and colleges. If the government wishes to support schools to develop their approach to tackling sexual harassment and violence, it will need to employ a range of approaches, of which inspection is just one.

Statutory guidance sets clear expectations for schools and colleges to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. Generally, school and college leaders tell us that the guidance is clear, although they would appreciate all guidance being in one easily accessible place and updates to be made in good time before the school year starts so they can plan training accordingly. The phrasing in ‘Working together to safeguard children’ could also be updated to explicitly state that all types of schools

and colleges are expected to be one of the ‘relevant agencies’ that LSPs need to engage with and that multi-agency audits should be completed regularly.

There is a gap in guidance for how schools and colleges should respond when there are lengthy investigations or no prosecution or conviction. Some school and college leaders also want clearer guidance on where their responsibilities start and end, for example with incidents of harmful sexual behaviour that happen outside school. Developing clearer guidance in this area would help school and college leaders assure parents, children and young people that they are making decisions in their best interests and in line with guidance.

To assess whether the current safeguarding framework and guidance for Ofsted and ISI inspectors were strong enough, we carried out an internal review of:

- both inspection frameworks and Ofsted’s schools and further education and skills inspection handbooks
- evidence bases gathered on inspection of 108 schools and colleges, including state-funded schools, independent non-association schools that Ofsted inspects and independent schools that ISI inspects
- safeguarding guidance and training for inspectors of both inspectorates, with a particular focus on peer-on-peer harmful sexual behaviour

We also reviewed our previous handling of complaints about schools and colleges that focused on peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. This included complaints about the non-association independent schools that we inspect. You can find further details of this internal review in the methodology.

ISI also carried out a similar review of complaints it has received that focused on sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, which it shared with the review team.

Frameworks, handbooks, guidance and training

The review looked at our ‘Inspecting safeguarding’ guidance, which covers early years, education and skills settings.[footnote 63] It found that this clearly outlines how inspectors should inspect how well schools and colleges respond to peer-on-peer abuse, such as sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. Since the introduction of the education inspection framework (EIF) in September 2019, the school inspection handbook has also made specific reference to peer-on-peer abuse. All inspectors were trained on how to consider such abuse during inspection earlier that year.

The handbook was updated recently to reflect the government's changes to guidance on RSHE. All school inspectors have received mandatory training on what this means for inspection practice.

However, the review also found that, although Ofsted's education inspectors are trained using 'Inspecting safeguarding', the further education and skills inspection handbook does not specifically refer to sexual violence and sexual harassment, including online. We will therefore update it to include this.

ISI inspects independent schools' compliance with The Independent School Standards Regulations.[footnote 64] ISI reports on the extent to which the independent school standards are being met. The ISI inspection framework provides for 2 types of routine inspection: regulatory compliance only or educational quality with focused compliance. Both inspection types always consider whether the school meets the expected independent school standards in welfare, health and safety. These standards include whether a school is meeting the statutory standards, which includes safeguarding expectations as set out by the government. Although the independent school standards do not make explicit reference to peer-on-peer sexual violence and harassment, they require the school's leaders to actively promote the well-being of the pupils. Leaders must also follow all statutory guidance relating to safeguarding, which includes peer-on-peer abuse. When inspecting compliance with the relevant standards, ISI inspectors record whether the school's safeguarding policy sets out its response to peer-on-peer abuse and whether it includes procedures to minimise the risk of peer-on-peer abuse.

In the visits we did as part of this review, inspectors found that talking to single-sex groups was an effective way to gather evidence about sexual harassment and violence. Therefore, both Ofsted and ISI will make it explicit to inspectors that they should do this during future inspections wherever possible. This will help inspectors to understand how a school's or college's approach to tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, is working.

The review of Ofsted's training showed that all school and further education and skills inspectors were trained in 2018 and 2019 on peer-on-peer abuse. This included sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. The training is covered in different modules for education and social care inspectors. For example, further education and skills inspectors do not complete the same training as school inspectors.

ISI provided Ofsted with a chronology of training since 2017. It also showed us examples of its inspector training materials relating to safeguarding and peer-on-peer abuse. Most training was mandatory. Some was optional, such as a workshop on peer-on-peer abuse delivered at a conference held for all ISI inspectors in January 2019. Training materials referenced government statutory guidance on safeguarding, including guidance relating

to peer-on-peer abuse, sexual harassment and violence. ISI reported that it held follow-up discussions to make sure that inspectors understood the implications for inspection activity.

For 2021/22 and beyond, Ofsted and ISI will work together to produce and jointly deliver further training on inspecting safeguarding in education settings. This will include issues of peer-on-peer abuse.

State-funded and independent schools and colleges have to implement statutory guidance. This should ensure that they have a common approach to safeguarding, including peer-on-peer abuse. Ofsted and ISI will continue to work together to prioritise a consistent standard of inspection practice in this area.

Previous inspections

We reviewed the evidence bases for 93 inspections under Ofsted's EIF. The inspections all took place between September 2019 and March 2020, when routine inspections were suspended due to the pandemic.

The review found that evidence bases demonstrated that inspectors have a good knowledge of 'Keeping children safe in education'. They use this knowledge to determine the questions they will ask on inspection. Scrutiny of inspection evidence found that inspectors had explored children and young people's experiences of sexting and upskirting, and what school and college staff had done in response.

Following notification of a school inspection, school leaders are asked to present their records and analysis of sexual violence and sexual harassment, including online, in school by 8am on the first day of the inspection. This is set out as a requirement in our school inspection handbook.

In September 2019, when this requirement was brought in, we expected to see a substantial flow of evidence about these issues, given that there was already considerable information about their prevalence in schools. In fact, this has not been the case. It is surprising that, in the inspections we looked at for the review, only 6% of schools gave evidence of sexual violence and sexual harassment, including online, in response to the request. Forty-six per cent of the schools provided a nil return. These figures may reflect the gap between staff's and children and young people's knowledge and perceptions, as discussed earlier. The remaining 48% of schools neither provided information nor a statement that there was no relevant information. In most of the inspections where no information was provided, inspectors did not record how they followed up with leaders to determine whether a nil return was an accurate picture.

As a result, we cannot yet say that EIF inspections are sufficiently assessing the extent and nature of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, between peers in schools. We will mandate that, in future, inspectors should follow up and record schools' responses to the request. We will quality assure future evidence bases to make sure that this happens. We will also reiterate this through inspector training.

The requirement for leaders to provide records and analysis of sexual violence and sexual harassment, including online, is not currently in our further education and skills inspection handbook. We will amend this. In future, on notification of college inspections, leaders will be asked to supply this information to inspectors. Inspectors will also be mandated to follow this up with college leaders. ISI will also ask for this information from schools on notification.

The review also found that inspectors seek evidence from a variety of sources to triangulate their findings about safeguarding. For example, they speak to staff, children and young people, governors, senior leaders, support staff and external colleagues such as local authority representatives. When a safeguarding issue emerges on inspection, they follow it up.

Furthermore, the scrutiny of Ofsted inspection evidence shows that when inspectors have focused on the PSHE curriculum (known as a 'deep dive') in EIF inspections, they examine relationships and sex education very effectively. However, unless there is a deep dive into PSHE, there is little time on inspection to look closely at a school's or college's approach to creating a culture of safeguarding around peer-on-peer sexual harassment and violence. Inspection resource constraints limit the number of deep dives to 3 or 4 per inspection. Ofsted's inspectors cover a sample of curriculum areas rather than every subject in depth. It is therefore not possible to review PSHE fully on every inspection.

We also reviewed 15 evidence bases of ISI inspections. We found that they included appropriate consideration and clear evaluation of how well schools managed their procedures and policies related to safeguarding and handling complaints. The review also found careful pre-inspection planning and appropriate recording of evidence in relation to the independent school standards. However, the inspection evidence did not always identify how the curriculum developed children and young people's understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. It also did not always show how inspectors cross-referenced leaders' and pupils' views with other evidence, such as record-keeping. In a few evidence bases, inspectors appeared to give weight to the views of leaders, who responded that reporting systems and effective pastoral care were in place, rather than to those of pupils, where a significant minority had concerns.

Handling of complaints about schools that refer to peer-on-peer sexual harassment and violence

A review of Ofsted's handling of complaints about schools we inspect found that they are dealt with comprehensively. We also review annually how we handle them. All complaints about independent schools were referred on to the DfE, and those about colleges to ESFA. When a complaint about a school or college refers to sexual abuse, we may notify the local authority for a maintained school or ESFA for an academy, free school or college. We may also inspect immediately or use the information to inform the school's or college's next routine inspection.

When ISI receives complaints about the schools it inspects, it currently refers to the DfE only those that relate to the independent school standards. ISI has told us that all complaints about sexual abuse are referred to the DfE. ISI has recently reviewed its policy and from September 2021, all complaints (whether they refer to the independent school standards or not) will be referred to the DfE.

The DfE, in collaboration with ESFA, Ofsted and ISI, may wish to review how complaints are handled.

As a result of this review, both Ofsted and ISI will update training and inspection handbooks where necessary. This will strengthen inspectors' ability to inspect how schools and colleges are tackling peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online.

Conclusion

This rapid thematic review has revealed how prevalent sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are for children and young people. It is concerning that for some children, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them. This review did not analyse whether the issues are more or less prevalent for different groups of young people, and there may well be differences, but it found that the issues are so widespread that they need addressing for all children and young people. It recommends that schools, colleges and multi-agency partners act as though sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening, even when there are no specific reports.

Methodology

This review has a limited scope, constrained both by the terms of reference given to Ofsted by government and also the time constraints. The findings from our visits are not fully representative of schools or colleges across England.

Our sample sizes are also not big enough to draw any conclusions about the protection of children from minority ethnic groups or those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Reporting of sexual abuse by these children is thought to be even less common. Further research into the prevalence, experiences and outcomes for these children is crucial.

Visits to schools and colleges

We carried out 32 2-day visits to schools and colleges in April and May 2021. The inspection team had at least one female inspector as part of each visit. ISI inspectors shadowed Ofsted's inspectors on 13 visits. Before the visits, both ISI and Ofsted inspectors received 2 days of refresher safeguarding training with a specific focus on peer-on-peer sexual harassment and violence.

In selecting the research sample, we sought to include some schools where concerns have been reported. We identified these through complaints made to Ofsted or the publicly available Everyone's Invited testimonials. We also included others to provide a more balanced cross-section of school/provider types. We sought to ensure a mix of independent and state-funded schools, as well as covering different geographical locations. Given the focus on adequacy of current inspection models, the sample was also weighted in favour of schools/colleges inspected since September 2019. The overall small sample size does not make it possible to compare and contrast different types of schools. But it gives confidence that where we saw patterns of behaviours or experience, they were not limited to one particular type.

The sample included:

- 14 state-funded schools
- 14 ISI-inspected independent schools
- 2 Ofsted-inspected independent schools
- 2 FE colleges

The majority of the schools were secondary schools or all-through schools. Two were state-funded primary schools.

In one visit, we identified serious safeguarding failures. Inspectors ended the visit and we carried out an initial inspection under section 8 ('no formal

designation'). This led to a full inspection. Findings from the early part of the visit are used in this report.

Focus groups with children and young people

In the visits, we held up to 4 focus groups with children and young people on each visit. These lasted for 45 minutes. In total, we had over 125 focus groups with approximately 900 children and young people participating. Parents were given an 'opt out' letter if they did not want their child to take part. Inspectors also gave children and young people the option not to take part on the day. Leaders highlighted where it would not be appropriate for us to talk to children and young people due to ongoing investigations or additional context. Inspectors spoke to the children and young people in single-sex, same-age groups. Where there was an existing LGBT+ pupil group, we asked whether members would like to speak to us. We made time to do so where they agreed.

Activities that inspectors led children and young people through in the focus groups included the following:

- colouring in/marking areas on a map of their school according to how safe/unsafe parts of the school were, discussing this among the group as they did so
- answering a short questionnaire about the prevalence of sexual abuse among their peers and who they would speak to, if anyone, if they were the victim of abuse or harassment (we did this with those in Year 9 and above only)
- choosing from 4 scenarios to use to talk hypothetically about what might be said/done among their peer group in different situations, as well as who they might speak to/tell
- explaining what they are taught in school/college about relationships and sex and whether they thought it was enough/well taught

Inspectors summarised the conversations from each focus group and collated the questionnaires, both of which were analysed by the research team.

Discussions with school and college staff

As part of each visit, inspectors spoke to:

- the headteacher/principal
- the DSL
- the behaviour lead
- the lead for PSHE and/or RSHE
- 2 groups of staff

Inspectors looked at records of sexual harassment and sexual abuse; behaviour records; policies for safeguarding, behaviour, equal opportunities and staff conduct; and the policy and curriculum documentation for PSHE and RSHE.

Inspectors collated all the evidence from each visit, which was analysed by the research team.

Focus groups with multi-agency partners

From our list of 32 schools and colleges, we identified 12 LSPs with whom we held 45-minute focus groups. Each group had a representative from children's social care, the police and health partners. The discussions were framed around the terms of reference for the review covering the 2 multi-agency safeguarding questions, from the partners' perspectives:

- How well are safeguarding guidance and processes understood and working between schools, colleges and LSPs?
- Does working between schools, colleges and LSPs, including local authority children's social care, the police, health services and other support, need to be strengthened?

The information from these focus groups was analysed by the research team and triangulated with the perspectives from schools themselves.

Victim/survivor focus groups

Ten individuals from 6 organisations spoke to Ofsted to share their experiences and views from a survivor/victim perspective.

Everyone's Invited testimonies

As of 6 April 2021, there were 2,340 testimonies publicly available on the Everyone's Invited website. We extracted this text using web scraping.

Our text analysis then focused on the 2,030 testimonies thought to relate to young people of school or further education age in England. For example, we excluded testimonies that referred to universities or to other countries. The testimonies were analysed using computer-based learning techniques,

including key-word searches and topic modelling. This was complemented by textual analysis of 250 random testimonies, which were read in full.

Data from these was recorded, including:

- what the incident was
- where it happened
- the characteristics of the victim and their relationship to the perpetrator
- the response to the incident
- the incident's impact on the victim

The intention of this analysis was to identify common themes and build a broad picture of the experiences young people are reporting.

Ofsted and ISI complaints

Between September 2019 and March 2021, Ofsted received 291 complaints against schools and colleges about peer-on-peer sexual abuse. All were logged as safeguarding concerns.

In order for Ofsted to consider a complaint against a school as a 'qualifying complaint', it must meet certain legislative requirements:

- it must be made in writing
- it must not be a prescribed exception (that is, a concern for which another statutory agency has responsibility for handling)
- it must be a prescribed description (leadership and management, standards of education being achieved, quality of education, how far the education meets the needs of pupils, social, spiritual, moral and cultural development and well-being of pupils)
- it must have been through the local complaints routes

For this report, we reviewed 16 complaints that we chose to meet the following criteria:

- they contained an element of alleged sexual abuse, harassment or violence
- they came from all Ofsted regions
- they involved maintained schools and academies, pupil referral units (PRUs), independent schools and colleges
- they allowed us to sample complaints about child serious incident notifications, local contextual information, qualifying and non-qualifying complaints and 11A investigations

- they were retained for the next inspection, resulted in inspections being brought forward or resulted in a no formal designation inspection under section 8

Between September 2019 and March 2021, ISI reports that it received 37 complaints against schools about peer-on-peer sexual abuse and that all were logged as safeguarding concerns and referred to the DfE.

Review of inspection evidence bases

Ofsted reviewed 93 evidence bases, the majority of which were from inspections carried out between September 2019 and March 2020. This covers the period when the EIF was in place and pauses when routine EIF inspection activity ceased. Another 16 evidence bases from Ofsted-inspected residential special schools and boarding schools were also reviewed. We sampled evidence bases from across all 8 Ofsted regions. We included those from inspections of primary, secondary and special schools and PRUs. Within this sample, there were 30 independent school inspections, 20 emergency inspections and 10 standard inspections.

Ofsted also reviewed ISI evidence bases from 15 inspections that took place between October 2018 and December 2020.

Literature review

The literature that fed into this report covered a broad range of topics, including:

- statistics of child peer-on-peer sexual harassment and violence, including the prevalence for children with protected characteristics or from different socio-economic backgrounds, such as LGBT+ or minority ethnic children and young people
- definitions of child sexual abuse, including peer-on-peer sexual harassment and violence
- barriers that prevent children and young people talking about abuse and good practice
- online sexual abuse
- pornography
- preventative measures in schools

Parent focus groups

Ofsted carried out one focus group with state-school parents and another with independent school parents. The number of parents participating was too small to draw conclusions but we used their comments as part of the wider evidence base for this report.

List of stakeholders we spoke to as part of the review

Reference group members

Chief Constable Simon Bailey (NPCC lead on child protection)

Geoff Barton (Association of School and College Leaders)

Tom Bennett (DfE behaviour advisor)

Professor Chris Bonell (Faculty of Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)

Dame Rachel de Souza (Children's Commissioner)

Hilary Garratt (Deputy Chief Nursing Officer for England, NHS)

Sarah Hannafin/James Bowen (National Association of Head Teachers)

David Hughes (Association of Colleges)

John Jolly (ParentKind)

Ian Keating (Local Government Association)

Julia Lagoutte/Rowan Davies (Mumsnet)

Michele Lawrence/Wendy Nicholson (Public Health England)

Charlotte Ramsden (Association of Directors of Children's Services) Julie Robinson (Independent Schools Council)

Andrea Simon/ Denise Ugur (End Violence Against Women Coalition)

Russell Viner (Professor in Adolescent Health, University College London and former President, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health)

Peter Wanless (NSPCC)

Vanessa Ward (ISI)

Other stakeholders

DfE ministers

Officials from DfE, No 10 and Home Office

Dame Vera Baird (Victims' Commissioner)

Dan Bell (Men and Boys Coalition)

Mary Bousted (National Education Union)

Leora Cruddas/ Steve Rollett (Confederation of School Trusts)

Helen Earner (Charity Commission)

Anna Glinski (Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse)

Jonny Gutteridge (Male Survivors Trust)

Amelia Handy (Rape Crisis England)

Emma Hardy MP

Nicole Jacobs (Domestic Abuse Commissioner)

Emma James (Barnardo's)

Dr Jenny Lloyd (University of Bedfordshire)

Amy Norton (Office for Students)

Jess Phillips MP

Patrick Roach (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers)

Soma Sara/ Wendy Mair (Everyone's Invited)

Wes Streeting MP

Gail Tolley (London Borough of Brent)

Colin Walker (Safeline)

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