

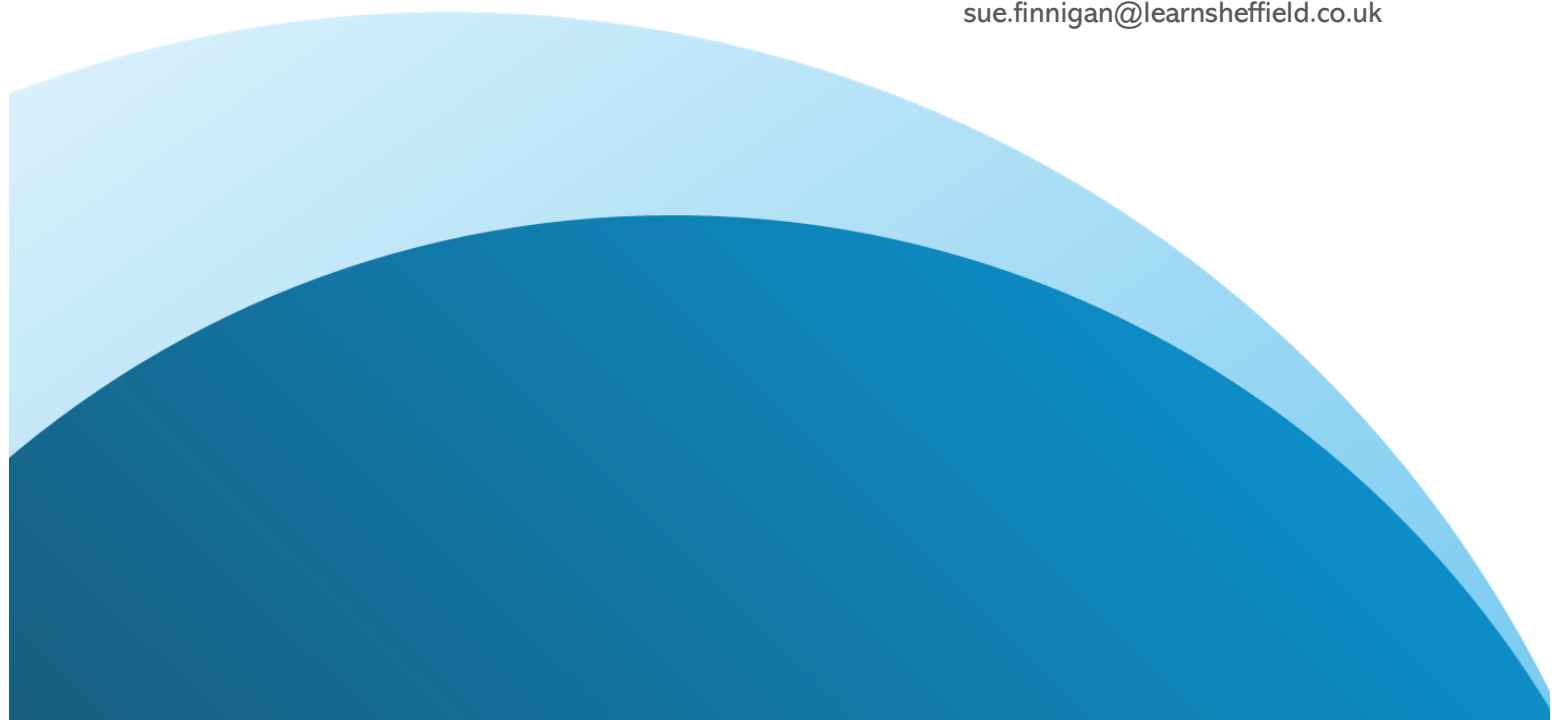
Sexual Harassment in South Yorkshire Schools 2023

Hearing Our Young People's Voice

This qualitative report aims to represent the voice of a cross section of secondary school age young people in South Yorkshire to reflect their experience of sexual harassment in their daily lives.

It records their experiences and their recommendations about how schools could support them further.

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Executive Summary

This report highlights the prevalence of sexual harassment in the lives of secondary age pupils across South Yorkshire. The voice of more than 200 young people was captured through a series of workshops and activities across nine secondary schools and youth parliaments in the region. Feedback demonstrates the impact of online activity and pornography on the lives of young people and how this is giving rise to increasingly negative attitudes to women and girls.

Sexual harassment pervades all areas of society. The findings highlight the prevalence of the problem in schools, the community, and in the familial setting. The views of young people align with the findings of wider research in identifying that the problem is so widespread that young people often see little point in reporting it; sexual harassment is becoming normalised.

The young people involved in the project talked about their experiences of sexual harassment at school. The picture they paint is bleak. They talked about a culture that is heavily influenced by online pornography, and feel that the curriculum relating to sexual harassment was too little and too late. They talked about other factors in schools that they feel contribute to the issue, such as seating plans, toilets, and rules around uniform.

The findings of this piece of work highlights the need for schools and the sector to better understand the experiences of young people, refine and prioritise the curriculum around PSHE and/or RSHE, and to reconsider some standard operating procedures. Key recommendations are:

To support the development of approaches which provide more effective means to capture and share the experience and voice of young people: Settings need to develop more effective methods of capturing the voice of young people so that they have a more accurate understanding of their experiences, their views, and their suggestions for improvement.

To ensure that all young people understand what constitutes sexual harassment and are equipped to respond effectively when it occurs: This is about developing understanding and equipping young people with strategies to address and prevent negative behaviours by refining the curriculum. This includes prioritising PSHE/RSHE within the curriculum, the content of the curriculum itself, and wider considerations about the format and delivery of it.

To develop an effective culture against sexual harassment and violence against women and girls and mitigate against any unintended consequences arising from policy and procedure: This links to safeguarding and is about developing a culture where sexual harassment and misogynistic views are minimised. It is about developing a culture of equality, where young people understand what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, and are able to protect themselves more effectively. This culture should also be an underlying principle in the development of organisational practice and operating procedures.

Background:

Sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are prevalent in society and schools. In 2021, the government commissioned Ofsted to carry out a rapid review into the sexual abuse in schools and colleges, and the subsequent report¹ highlighted the scale of the issue. Sexual harassment and online abuse are far more common in the lives of young people than realised, so much so that such behaviours have largely been normalised and often go unreported. The scale of the problem cannot be underestimated. Ofsted held discussions with over 900 young people and found that 92% of girls and 74% of boys said that sexist name calling was frequent. Nearly 90% of females and nearly half of males said that they or their peers had received explicit pictures or videos they did not want to see.

In 2022, the Internet Watch Foundation published research² which shows the age at which self-generated child sexual abuse images of children, consistent with wholly online sexual exploitation, is most prevalent in the 11–13-year-old age group, with the 7–10-year-old age group being the next most prolific. This shows the age groups at greatest risk of online sexual abuse has moved downwards in the past decade, and begins to highlight the scale of the problem.

In January 2023, the Children’s Commissioner for England published a paper³ on the prevalence of children and young people’s experience of pornography. This showed that pornography consumption is widespread among young children, with the average age of initial exposure to it being just 13 years old. It explored the impact of such exposure, including an expectation among many of the enjoyment of sex being linked to physical aggression and the link to low self-esteem. This report was followed up by another⁴ looking at the link between pornography and harmful sexual behaviour among children. It reinforces the link between pornography and harmful (and often violent) sexual behaviour.

Other online content promotes misogyny. As well as the rise of influencers, there is a whole areas of the internet known as the ‘Manosphere’, where women are generally held responsible for the perceived lack of opportunity and success for men and boys. Almost a quarter of 13- to 15-year-old boys had a positive view of the online influencer Andrew Tate⁵. Such content, and the early exposure to pornography (and the link to sexual violence), contributes to a negative and demeaning view of women and girls. The research to date provides compelling evidence that pornography and other online content is a contributory factor to an increase in the prevalence of sexual harassment. The views of society are also changing, with more behaviours now being viewed as sexual harassment. A report from YouGov, highlighted the changes in attitudes, particularly within the younger generation⁶.

Sexual harassment is an issue for schools. The Ofsted report commented that it was far more prevalent in schools than some teachers and leaders estimated, and this was particularly so with regard to online sexual abuse. The feedback from young people and school leaders showed that sexual harassment is consistently being under-reported. Ofsted therefore recommended that leaders ‘should assume that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening in their setting, even where there are no specific reports’. It urged leaders to create a culture of zero-tolerance to sexual harassment and develop procedures to identify issues and intervene early to better protect children and young people.

¹ [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, June 2021, Ofsted](#)

² <https://annualreport2022.iwf.org.uk/>

³ [‘A lot of it actually abuse’: Young people and pornography, January 2023, Children’s Commissioner](#)

⁴ [Evidence on pornography’s influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children, May 2023, Children’s Commissioner](#)

⁵ [One in six boys aged 6-15 have a positive view of Andrew Tate, September 2023, YouGov](#)

⁶ [More and more actions by men are being recognised by Britons as sexual harassment, May 2023, YouGov](#)

This piece of research aimed to explore the issue of sexual harassment in South Yorkshire in more depth by capturing the voice of pupils. The project was commissioned by the South Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit (SYVRU) from Learn Sheffield as part of a wider project called Developing Healthy Attitudes (DHA)⁷.

The SYVRU has reducing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) as one of its principal priorities. In conjunction with the Police and Crime Commissioner, they have completed a scoping exercise which highlighted a number of gaps, challenges and opportunities, focused on addressing violence against women and girls. In addition, the work included a mapping exercise which captured the large number of statutory and voluntary services operating in this space. Their work covers many different aspects but does not include the experience of young women and girls in schools. This research aims to address this.

Scope and methodology:

The project visited a number of schools in a variety of contexts across each of the cities and boroughs across South Yorkshire. The project also engaged with the Youth Cabinet or Council in each area and this meant that the voices of a far greater number of school communities were represented within this piece of work. Facilitators:

- Engaged with 9 secondary schools (2 in Barnsley, 3 in Doncaster, 2 in Rotherham and 2 in Sheffield)
- Met with over 200 young people aged between 14-15 and 16-17 (Year 10 and 12)
- Met separately with leadership team representatives in each of the schools.
- Met with Youth Cabinets/Youth Councils for Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield

Approximately 65% of the pupils involved were female and 35% male. The majority of pupils were classed as White British and represented the ethnic make-up of the schools who volunteered to be part of the project.

Facilitators delivered a workshop on sexual harassment focussed on giving the young people knowledge of what is meant by sexual harassment (and the law), techniques to deal with it, and what a good ally can do to mitigate matters and offer support safely. The young people were then asked about their experiences and knowledge of sexual harassment in their schools, what their school did well to support them, and what the school or the education system in general could do to improve provision and support for them and their peers.

The workshop: Learning about Sexual Harassment

The workshops were delivered by two facilitators, both of whom were experienced teachers and professionals in their field. Schools were asked to provide 20 pupils for the workshop and that this cohort be representative of the makeup of the school. Settings interpreted this in different ways. Some groups were predominantly or exclusively female whilst others had a disproportionate number of pupils (generally Year 10 boys) who they felt would benefit from the input based on prior behaviour.

The makeup of the groups influenced the success of the workshop and quality of the contributions made by the young people. The most successful groups were those that had both males and females, where pupils had a full range of opinions and all were confident enough to express their thoughts. Single sex groups yielded very frank inputs but where the groups were entirely female some resentment was shown. It was perceived that the school perceived sexual harassment was as an issue for women to solve and were critical of the project's methodology. Where the cohort had a high proportion of pupils with very challenging misogynistic views on violence against women and girls, a different method approach was required. This raises interesting questions for the makeup of groups for PSHE or RSHE, and is in line with the findings of Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE), which

⁷ <https://www.learnsheffield.co.uk/Projects/Developing-Healthy-Attitudes/>

indicates that some pupils will require small group interventions for such content rather like those commonly used for English and Mathematics.

The workshops were most successful when the school clearly prioritised the event and the outcome. This included setting up a comfortable and flexible space to work, providing a conference style set up with refreshments and briefing the pupils on the aims of the project. The conference style was important as it signified to the pupils that the school felt this was a high-status event. Where a break was taken out of the room, it proved more difficult for the facilitators. They needed re-establish the reflective and supportive atmosphere created prior to the pupils dispersing.

Facilitators found that the young people felt more comfortable when school staff were not present. Pupils were informed that what they said would remain confidential unless there were concerns over their safety and wellbeing. They also knew that the results would be fed back to the school in an anonymised way and that they would feed into this report.

Each workshop commenced with a warm-up game. This was essential to create a warm and light atmosphere and to establish a group ethos. The pupils then worked in groups to produce freeze frames of films and TV programmes. This served two purposes, firstly to aid cohesion, and secondly to allow the facilitators to establish whether the pupils were comfortable when working in groups and whether they knew about well-established PHSE learning techniques such as 'hot seats' and 'freeze frames'.

The freeze frames were predicated with very clear instructions that permission to touch anyone at all must be sought but that there should be no contact with body parts generally covered by a swimsuit or underwear and that they were not to go closer to these parts than a forearm length. Facilitators demonstrated this and all of the groups adhered to this instruction. Many of young people reported that they felt awkward undertaking these activities. The facilitators observed that this was particularly noticeable in schools where there was no specialist PHSE provision or where the approach was more didactic.

Each freeze frame had pupils who were the perpetrator, the victim, and at least one in the role of by-stander. The lead facilitator then teased out from the group how each of the roles felt. Many pupils recognised the relationship between misogyny and power, and expressed the difficulties of being a bystander.

The young people were then asked to enact two freeze frames around common sexual harassment scenarios:

- A boy grabs your bottom whilst walking down the corridor at school
- A group of girls laugh at you and make fun of the size of your penis
- A friend of your parents has offered you a lift home, but in the car, they make suggestive/sexual comments to you and they warn you to say nothing
- An older person touches your breasts whilst leaning over you to show you something and they have a reputation of getting too close
- Your ex-boyfriend/girlfriend has a photo of your genitals/breasts on their phone, and now they've sent it to other people in school
- A man is standing very close behind you on a crowded bus, and he is rubbing himself against you
- You have received a 'dick pic' from someone in your class
- You are being asked for nudes by someone in your year group
- You're alone with a close family friend. They ask you to perform a sexual act. They tell you that it's your fault for tempting them and warn you not to tell anyone because you'll get the blame.

Every group showed some surprise at the direct choice of language used (e.g., 'dick pics' and nudes) as recommended by the Ofsted report of 2021. All the groups agreed that this was the language they used but was not used by school staff who preferred terms such as 'sexting'.

In the next part of the workshop, pupils were asked to write down how they would respond as a victim to the situations in the freeze frames and were given free range to use bad language which would be appropriate in the scenarios. Many of the pupils' responses were violent or aggressive. The pupils were then asked to reflect on the pros and cons of each course of action identified. This provoked discussions on the law around self-defence. Without exception, pupils felt that learning simple self-defence skills in school would be useful, with many reflecting that even if they had a rudimentary knowledge of martial arts, it might make them feel more confident. This would need to be combined with an understanding that initiating violence brings with it both risks and consequences.

Many pupils commented on the powerlessness of the victim, and facilitators led discussions on the psychological principles of flight, fight, freeze and fawn and the benefit of muscle memory in thinking through and reenacting what individuals might say or do in such scenarios. This active rehearsing is a common feature of a high-quality RSHE curriculum.

The next part of the workshop gave the pupils a chance to practice assertive confrontation techniques. Scenarios about equality rather than sexual harassment were chosen for this activity as they provided a greater opportunity for bystanders to intervene. These included:

- Your friend makes a sexist comment
- A sports coach tells a homophobic joke
- Your brother says something about it being ok to hit their partner
- Your friend says trans people are just weird
- Your mum says something unkind about a disabled person
- A neighbour says something horrible about 'immigrants'.

After some modelling by the facilitators, most pupils were able to do this successfully. Pupils recognised this as a good way to disagree with a derogatory point of view in a polite manner. The final part of the workshop then explored the definitions of sexual harassment, the law, and other techniques for bystanders.

At the very end of the morning following the student voice section, all the members of the group formed a seated circle and requested permission to place a hand on their neighbour's knee. The person who had given the permission was then asked to loudly instruct the person to get off them in an assertive way, without saying the word please. Some pupils required coaching to do this with a loud enough voice (others not!).

By the end of the workshop, all the pupils reported that they knew a lot more about what was meant by sexual harassment than they had prior to the session. The overwhelming majority also reported that they felt more confident to deal with it than they had previously. Responses from the students in the workshops indicated that there had been little prior learning on this topic.

Student Voice on Sexual Harassment

This part of the project was focussed on capturing the experiences of young people and their peers. Facilitators explained the work of the SYVRU on violence against women and girls and how this session would help inform their future work. The pupils then worked in groups to identify the kind of sexual harassment and violence they'd experienced in- and out- of school. Some common themes emerged, and these are explored in the sections below.

Pupils in every setting visited recognised the priority their school was giving to sexual harassment by enabling the workshops to take place. Without exception, each group recognised the pressure put on schools to achieve academic results. They felt that most schools were trying their best.

They felt that schools were forced by the education system to prioritise academic subjects above learning about topics such as sexual harassment. They felt that most staff took sexual harassment seriously but sometimes the reputation of the school was perceived to be the priority.

They recognised good practice – some schools have reporting buttons on their websites, student-led campaigns or pupil involvement initiatives. They felt these things were sometimes superficial because the basics of learning in this area were not being covered in lessons. Pupils frequently named members of staff they could approach who they knew were active supporters of preventing violence against women and girls. Many said they wished they could do this in confidence without triggering safeguarding procedures.

In some settings the pupils were very confident that instances of sexual harassment would be dealt with very seriously, but in others they were unclear what sanctions were applied and felt that they didn't get feedback following a report. Their perception was that sometimes individuals went unpunished and returned to class immediately. Young people generally did not report matters to the police as they perceived they would not be taken seriously.

Young people also spoke of the need to examine the student voice of Black and Asian, SEND and LGBT+ pupils separately and felt that the issues are more complex around the intersections of protected characteristics.

On the online world

Pupils in every setting spoke of the sexualised nature of their online lives, about the pressure this puts on them, and about how this change was marked moving to secondary school. They spoke of this peaking in Year 9, before settling down by the end of Year 10 onwards, where issues in their lives were more likely to relate to personal relationships.

Pornography was widespread with one pupil saying, "Porn is absolutely everywhere". These comments are consistent with the findings of the Children's Commissioner on Pornography. When asked whether the percentages mentioned in the Children's Commissioner's report on pornography were in their opinion accurate the pupils universally agree they were in the right ballpark.

Both females and males spoke of receiving unrequested and unwanted porn. Boys spoke of the pressures on them to not react negatively to the porn they are sent even if they didn't want it; some boys spoke of not wanting to say they didn't want to receive porn for fear of being labelled as 'gay'.

Young people reported how some video sharing social media companies such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, were getting better at blocking pornographic videos, but explained that there were elaborate ways of sharing links exist through comments on video sharing sites or via sharing links to sites with more permissive policies such as X (Twitter).

Pupils spoke of the unrealistic expectations placed on them about sex after viewing pornography. Girls spoke about hearing discussions about pornography that they did not want to hear, and being asked to perform sexual acts based on pornographic scenarios. Some Year 10 boys were using dedicated adult sites (such as Pornhub) and a sizeable minority were using chat sites such as Reddit and 4Chan, and intimated their knowledge of the Dark Web. Although these sites contain a variety of content, they can be viewed as a gateway to the 'Manosphere'.

The sharing of images is widespread and problematic. Girls spoke of being asked for nudes both from random strangers in apps such as Snapchat and by boys they know. Girls spoke of receiving random 'dick pics' both from strangers and from people they know. One young woman spoke of receiving one or more per week and pupils in other settings agreed that this would not be unusual. Interestingly there were fewer requests from boys they knew in the settings visited which had village-type catchment areas. The pupils explained that was because everyone knew each other's family.

Linked to this is the notion of ‘leaked nudes’. These are nude pictures taken or shared consensually as part of a relationship, which were then spread after the relationship finished. Pupils felt that this was far more widespread than conceived by adults in schools. There was a strong feeling that the ‘blame’ for leaked nudes was often placed with the girl. Pupils also felt that if they reported this harassment, they were never told of the consequences.

Other feedback from pupils included girls reporting ratings and associated comments being put on social media, and LGBT+ pupils spoke of receiving homophobic and anti-trans hate online.

In the locality

Pupils talked about being followed closely when walking by another pedestrian (which was either a boy from school or someone they didn’t know), catcalling from cars by young men and being followed by them. They talked about unwanted comments based on appearance, how likely someone would want to have sex with them, and what sexual acts the people would like to perform with or on them (some groups said this was more common when they were in school uniform).

Many of the pupils were aware of ‘safe stores’ where girls could go for help. One young woman spoke about being supported by an assistant in Paperchase in Meadowhall and another about how a manager at a burger outlet in Doncaster gave refuge and called the police and parents for a frightened group of girls. The groups were of the view that more shops, retail centres, takeaways, and sports centres need to have procedures to support young people in vulnerable situations, similar to the ‘Ask for Angela’ scheme⁸.

In families

Most groups were aware of familial incidents of sexual harassment. Touching and over-familiarity by older cousins and uncles were mentioned. Many pupils said that these were resolved internally in families, and that they would choose to talk to a trusted member of their family (but sometimes feared they would not be believed).

Some young people said that they would not readily tell an adult in a school about such incidents. They felt that safeguarding protocols would immediately kick in and they felt the situation would then be out of their hands; they would have lost control.

The facilitators were firm in explaining the responsibilities of schools around safeguarding, but several pupils said they wished they could seek advice and have ‘off the record’ conversations with adults they trust in school, but they don’t as they know that such information must be passed on. More than one group mentioned that they knew of situations where a situation had been made worse by involving safeguarding teams as no criminal proceedings had ensued but there were resulting ramifications within the family group. This is perhaps an unintended consequence of the diligent and caring safeguarding work done in schools.

In school

Common themes included:

- The rating of girls on suitability for sex, with many groups reporting that this starts as early as Year 7 (One young woman in college reported being approached in her first week by a random male who told her she was just a ‘mid’)
- The rating of girls based on their clothing and hair, (e.g., short skirt = ‘slag’).
- The rating on young people their ‘body count’ (i.e. the number of sexual partners they have had) and the disparity between how this was viewed for males and females

⁸ <https://askforangela.co.uk/about/>

- Tally charts in toilets about rating of different girls' body parts
- Rumours about a boy's penis size
- Comments about which pornographic act the person would like to perform on them
- Loud discussions about pornography in front of people who don't want to hear it
- Body shaming comments such as 'I wouldn't shag that'
- Explicit sexual rumours spread about individuals
- Being inappropriately touched in school on corridors and stairs
- People (including adults) looking up skirts on stairs.

Almost every group raised reports of a supply teacher who was over familiar ('touchy') or made inappropriate comments. In all of the settings, the young people felt the school had dealt with this swiftly and reported that the person had not been re-employed by the school. This may require further investigation, but does raise an issue about how such situations are dealt with at agency-level.

Several pupils spoke of seating plans being problematic in the context of sexual harassment. Girls expressed their frustration about seating plans which placed well-behaved or reserved girls next to challenging male pupils. One young woman talked about boys discussing both their rating of her, and the contents of online pornography that they had watched, over her head. Girls spoke of inappropriate touching in lessons and being forced to sit beside boys who had a previous history of such touching. Seating plans were also heavily criticised in PSHE and RSHE lessons as pupils might be required to work closely with other pupils with whom they have had previous difficult experiences.

In almost every setting, young women brought up the harassment they perceived around the selection and implementation of school- and PE-uniform. Young women often couldn't understand the reasoning behind policy choices, for example not allowing leggings under shorts in PE. They often reported concerns that were related more to the communication of rules rather than the rules themselves.

Without exception, they spoke of being told that they must moderate their uniform in order not to distract boys and male staff. Many settings reported that they had specifically told staff not to say that. Young women were aggrieved by this as they felt it was directly contrary to the equality messages they hear and see outside school.

In many schools, girls wore skirts because the school regulation trouser were ill fitting or made of an uncomfortable fabric. These skirts were short and often worn with opaque tights. Some girls felt that they were made to feel "like slags" when asked to adjust their dress particularly by male members of staff. They also reported a double standard on hot days and non-uniform days e.g. girls being told the 3 b's – "no bra straps, bellies and boobs" whereas boys who removed t-shirts on the field or on trips and were perceived not to be challenged equally.

Girls spoke of PE uniform being problematic in many settings. They spoke of the fact that that sports leggings were often regarded as too revealing, even though they were mainstream sports and leisure wear. They spoke of girl's shorts being more revealing than those prescribed for the boys because they were shorter or more loosely fitting. They felt most comfortable in PE lessons with a regulation top and a combination of plain leggings and shorts as they preferred.

We acknowledge that this is a very contentious and problematic area for schools but felt we should represent the messages here to support colleagues in reflecting upon those issues.

There was often mention of feeling uncomfortable if they needed to visit the toilet during lessons because they were menstruating. Some girls spoke of boys and sometimes male staff joking about it being the wrong time of the month. They disliked toilet passes as they viewed these as being demeaning.

Some schools have gender neutral toilets. Young people applauded having these as an option, but girls particularly felt there should be some gendered facilities, and this was based largely on reasons of privacy and hygiene.

Pupils spoke of messages around sexual harassment and online abuse in the curriculum were sometimes sensationalised, responsive, and aimed to frighten them. These were often delivered via assemblies and were often centred around the law. For example, most pupils knew that the exchange of nudes could cause them to break the law and could result in them being placed on the Sex Offenders Register, but were sceptical that they would be charged given the proliferation of such content. They felt that, whilst assemblies were a good way of getting over basic facts, more discussion was needed. They felt that those pupils most in need of the messages were often absent or not attentive.

Many pupils spoke about being able to speak freely with their parents, but felt that their parents were not aware of how young people live their lives particularly online or were themselves constrained by religious and cultural viewpoints. Others just felt too embarrassed to talk to their parents about such matters.

Pupils spoke of the support needed for boys to help them to be more proactive in challenging any sexual harassment they saw. They also wanted to examine and explore the pressures and body image issues that they experience in the context of a sexualised culture.

Where relationships education was happening, the pupils spoke of the content being totally unrepresentative of their lives. Pupils felt that the content of the relationship education curriculum did not reflect their lives and the real-world sufficiently well; they felt that the content was more suitable for younger year groups. This was particularly acute in faith schools, where pupils felt that they felt the content was targeted at very young pupils. Pupils in these schools also spoke of the conflict of being a good member of their religious community and living in modern-day England.

At two student parliaments, some pupils spoke positively of their experience of RSHE. These young people came from schools that have a history of PSHE being embedded within the school and delivered by specialist teachers. In most settings, RSHE content is being delivered in lessons with a variety of titles. Leaders often spoke of renaming the subject to raise the status and significance of it, as it had not previously been taken seriously by pupils and, in some cases, staff.

Pupils felt that discussion of this content should happen in late Year 7 and Year 8 with some preparation in Year 6. Most settings may not do any detailed work about pornography until Year 10 which is simply too late. Where any sex education had happened, the pupils felt it was from a very negative viewpoint e.g., STI's, contraception etc. They wanted a more positive frame towards sex. They felt they received this from several websites and influencers, with sex spoken of as a pleasurable, normal, and consensual part of life for all parties.

Seating plans, as previously mentioned, are particularly troublesome in RSHE. Schools should carefully consider the needs of all pupils when deciding on seating arrangements in classrooms where sensitive discussions are taking place.

In some schools, more academic pupils had been encouraged to forgo RSHE in favour of increased academic qualifications. They then caught up RSHE via additional self-study (for example, being emailed a PowerPoint of the lesson) but they felt this was not adequate. Other schools use drop-down days to cover RSHE content, but this means that if someone is absent on that day, they will miss a large chunk of the information they need. This approach also means that pupils do not have an ongoing relationship with the person delivering the input, but it should be noted that some pupils preferred this. Other schools use tutor time to deliver RSHE. Pupils were particularly critical of this saying that it was very booklet based, hurried, and that the very pupils who need the content the most are often absent or elsewhere at this time.

Children acknowledged that many teachers who were not specialists in this area were trying very hard but relied heavily on videos, worksheets, and booklets. Pupils perceived them as being unable to manage the classroom discussion pupils wanted; they spoke about feeling sorry for their teachers who felt so awkward. The groups spoke of wanting to be able to discuss real life scenarios about issues which were directly relevant to their age group.

The effects of Covid were apparent in this work. The pupils we worked with were largely Year 10 and Year 12. As a consequence of the Covid lockdowns and restrictions, Year 10 pupils experienced a disrupted key stage 3, and Year 12 pupils missed a large part of Year 9 and had a disrupted Year 10. Pupils explained that on their return, schools had prioritised their mental health in RSHE and then had pushed their academic studies to mitigate against the time missed. This has resulted in many pupils having had little or no sex education in secondary schools. This is at a time when it is needed most.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are accompanied by suggested actions for the sector to consider and reflect upon.

Recommendation 1: Capture the views and experiences of young people

To support the development of approaches which provide more an effective means to capture and share the experience and voice of young people.

- **Capturing and using student voice:** Settings need to develop more sophisticated methods of capturing the experiences and views of young people. This should include a range of different mechanisms and where required, might have a specific focus. This needs to then inform strategic intent such as how the curriculum provides the right content at the right time to keep pupils safe.

Recommendation 2: Understanding sexual harassment

To ensure that all young people understand what constitutes sexual harassment and are equipped to respond effectively when it occurs.

- **Curriculum delivery:** Young people want discussion-based RSHE taught by confident and informed teachers. Schools should consider dedicated timetabled lessons for the delivery of the PSHE/RSHE curriculum founded on active discussion-based content. We need to review the skills, knowledge and training of those leading and delivering this content, and consider opportunities for teachers to reflect, share and develop consistent approaches to language in relation to sexual harassment.
- **Curriculum content:** We need to consider the expert-led development of approved resources to remove the pressure on individual schools. Curriculum content needs to be reviewed and refined so that it is age-appropriate content and more relevant to the experiences of young people. We need to ensure that the scope of the curriculum includes harassment beyond the school day, and in particular online, in the community and within families, and promote initiatives which reduce the experience of sexual harassment for young people beyond the school day.
- **Supporting the most in need through intervention:** We should consider developing additional targeted resources for use with small groups of pupils or individuals whose experience of sexual harassment is premature or extreme, and consider additional learning opportunities for young people who have missed key healthy relationships learning or who require additional support.

Recommendation 3: Culture and practice

To develop an effective culture against sexual harassment and violence against women and girls and mitigate against any unintended consequences arising from policy and procedure.

- **Further develop the culture to safeguarding:** Schools should consider how they might further strengthen and expand the culture to safeguarding. This could include developing their approach to tackling misogyny. There needs to be a greater understanding of the 'manosphere' and its impact on young men. Whilst complex, schools may wish to consider systems which enable constructive reporting of conduct, but are consistent with the framework of safeguarding. This could include developing signposting for young people from safe and reputable organisations where they can share their experiences and access resources.
- **Review organisational factors:** Schools should review organisational factors which are perceived by young people to exacerbate sexual harassment, such as the approach to seating plans, uniform, and toilet facilities.

Further research

Hate crime statistics indicate that our young people who are Black or Asian, LGBT+ or who have SEND receive a disproportionate amount of hate crime particularly online and we can therefore suggest with some confidence that women and girls at the intersection of protected characteristics may well receive a disproportionate degree of sexual harassment and violence, particularly online. This area could be one for further research and is not covered by this report.

Another area for further investigation would link to the comments made by pupils in almost every setting about over-familiar staff from supply agencies. This could include gathering more information from pupils, and discussions with leaders and supply agencies. Key lines of enquiry would be to understand what actions had taken place in instances of inappropriate conduct and on whether in such cases the adult was then able to work in another school or with another supply agency. This has parallels with police officers transferring to another force to evade vetting⁹.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all the schools who invited us in to work with their pupils. We, and all the pupils, agreed that this demonstrated a desire to improve and a showed a mature acknowledgement by the individual settings about the existence of the problem across the sector. It is important to acknowledge and recognise the candour and transparency of the schools involved, and their willingness to learn.

We also wish to thank all the pupils who worked with us on the project for their honesty, thoughtfulness, sensible suggestions, and for their desire to improve the situation for younger children and young people. Without exception, the pupils recognised that this is a hard topic for schools to tackle and were grateful that their school was taking this so seriously. These young people and their engagement with wider society will be fundamental in improving male attitudes to women and girls.

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⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/42000/documents/208864/default/>