Ofsted Sexual abuse report June 2021 Summary

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.

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