

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg ynghylch aflonyddu rhywiol rhwng cyfoedion ymysg dysgwyr](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners](#)

PPSH 08

Ymateb gan: Brook Cymru

Response from: Brook Cymru

Nodwch eich barn mewn perthynas â chylch gorchwyl yr ymchwiliad, sydd wedi'u grwpio'n 5 thema: | Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference, which

have been grouped into 5 themes:

1. Maint | Scale
2. Effaith | Impact
3. Effeithiolrwydd ymyriadau | Effectiveness of interventions
4. Y cyd-destun ehangach | Wider context
5. Arall | Other

1. Maint | Scale

We probably don't know the full scale of peer on peer sexual bullying in schools in Wales because there is no mechanism to capture all the events that have been reported and responded to, leaving aside those events that go unreported.

However, young people affected by peer on peer sexual harassment (mostly, but not exclusively young women and girls) routinely report that it is ubiquitous, it has become normalised and as such may not always even be recognised as something worth reporting. We also know from the Estyn report that those who have experienced sexual harassment are the least likely to think that reporting it will be a helpful experience for them.

We know from the Estyn report and other data that it is sometimes teachers themselves that ignore or dismiss harassing behaviour. Students have reported teachers sometimes framing harassing behaviour as 'boys will be boys'.



In some reports a message of victim blaming is conveyed when an approach is taken that encourages girls to be resilient and ignore bad/immature behaviour.

We also know, anecdotally, that some schools might be concerned that it will reflect badly on them if they escalate cases of peer on peer sexual harassment, which may cause them to ignore or minimise the problem.

The OFSTED report in England suggested that without sufficient data to evidence the scale of the problem it is probably safest to assume that it is a problem to a greater or lesser extent in all schools right now.

Some work needs to be done to consider the ways in which schools can capture and report on the issue going forward. Schools need to be rewarded for identifying, responding to and reporting on the problem, recognising that it is a universal issue faced by all schools – rather than fear they will be penalised.

Recommendation: More work needs to be done to understand whether lack of reporting is a result of:

- an internalised 'normalisation' of this behaviour.
- shame or embarrassment leading to a reluctance to report.
- is related to an actual experience of reporting it to teachers and not getting a satisfactory response.
- is related to a general perception within a school that it is unlikely the school will respond satisfactorily – perhaps because of its response to previous incidents.

Action must be taken to remedy lack of reporting, improve reporting mechanisms and ensure that schools respond to incidents swiftly and appropriately.

Recommendation: create fora/spaces in which schools and teachers can share best practice around responding to incidents.

2. Effaith | Impact

If the classroom, corridor or playground does not feel like a safe place for a pupil it will inevitably impact on their wellbeing and their ability to learn.

Even someone who hasn't directly experienced harassment will have witnessed it and be aware that it is an everyday occurrence. It therefore represents a constant threat even to those who haven't experienced it.



One of the broader societal impacts is the normalisation of everyday harassment which often escalates over time to more serious forms of sexual assault and violence against women and girls.

For those that have experienced harassment or violence, the impact may be mitigated by a swift, fair and thoughtful response from school staff which gives the message that reporting harassment is the right thing to do and that the school takes the welfare of its students seriously.

We know that teachers struggle to deal with incidents and a range of different inappropriate responses from schools can include:

- the victim/survivor of harassment or even sexual violence having to continue spending time in the same classroom with the person/s responsible.
- the victim/survivor even being moved out of that class themselves while the person/s responsible remains – an experience that may feel like being punished for speaking up.

a 'restorative justice' type approach without requisite understanding and training on how to do this properly. When done badly it can demand that the victim of harassment face their harasser. This may be frightening, distressing and experienced as seeking reconciliation of two equal people within a conflict, much like you might treat a playground scuffle, rather than i) recognising the imbalance in power, ii) the harm done, iii) the vulnerability of the victim/survivor, and iv) the need to satisfy the victim/survivor's need for a sense of justice and most importantly safety.

3. Effeithiolrwydd ymyriadau | Effectiveness of interventions

Brook is primarily focused on the school based aspects of this work - providing education for young people and professional training to upskills school staff on issues relating to sexual harassment. Therefore we don't feel we have the expertise to contribute towards this specific question on the effectiveness of interventions currently happening across Wales.

4. Y cyd-destun ehangach | Wider context

Online safety

Just as physical harassment is widespread in schools there is lots of evidence that young people are experiencing and carrying out online harassment, pressure to participate in image sharing, non-consenting sharing of existing images (intimate image abuse), cyberflashing (sending a naked image to someone without their



consent) and other forms of peer on peer bullying of a sexual nature. This is alongside forms of grooming and abuse perpetrated by adults.

The Online Safety Bill currently going through Westminster recognises that young people are particularly vulnerable online and need particular protection. It will introduce new powers for the regulator Ofcom to penalise tech companies which do not adequately protect young people, and aims to encourage tech companies to take action themselves to make their platforms, algorithms and search engines safer.

Young people's voices

We hope there will be increased openness to hearing from young people themselves and those supporting young people about how to make changes which will make the internet safer without closing off vital online spaces and vital information for young people. Technical solutions can be a blunt instrument if not properly thought through.

Brook has published two research studies on the way in which young people engage in relationships and community online with strong recommendations for better education and better recognition of young people's ability to inform this work.

[Digital Romance, 2017](#)

[Digital Intimacies, 2021](#)

Digital platforms should be more transparent about the way in which their algorithms work, and provide tools that support young people to have a healthy level of engagement. They need to find more accurate ways to recognise the difference between harmful and helpful information, especially around issues like sexual health and sexuality.

To gain the enormous benefits and opportunities of the internet without experiencing harm online young people also need to gain critical thinking, technical know-how, and an understanding of acceptable behaviour. This includes a better understanding of the commercial model for platforms, and the psychology and technology utilised to drive unhealthy levels of engagement, and sometimes directing users to harmful content.

Parental engagement and support

Adults at home, school and in the community have a vital part to play in supporting this process, educating themselves about the platforms young people are using. If key adults understand the benefits young people get from online connection as well as the risks it can help engender more constructive conversations about staying safe, and may make young people more likely to confide in parents/carers or other trusted adults if they do have a bad experience.



Warnings of generic danger inherent in the online world do not resonate with young people, do not support them to engage in more nuanced risk management.

School support for families to reinforce RSE messages and values

Families can play an important role in embedding the core values around consent, personal boundaries, permission giving and gender equality. Schools can support parents to have constructive conversations at home through training events, resource lists, resources and tips for beginning conversations, and signposting to useful websites.

The role of the Curriculum for Wales

Education is a vital tool of prevention and culture change in relation to peer on peer sexual harassment and sexual violence. Education and the experience of the whole school environment and response to sexual harassment/violence should aim to make all forms of harassment socially unacceptable; and aim to make all young people positive bystanders and active advocates for healthy relationships.

Brook welcomes the introduction of Relationships and Sexuality Education in all schools in Wales and is keen to support the provision of high quality resources and training to ensure it has a positive impact.

The encouragement for Relationships and Sexuality Education topics being addressed through a cross-curriculum approach in the new Curriculum for Wales is very positive. There may be a range of opportunities across the curriculum to address issues around healthy relationships; and to continually embed and reinforce values around the importance of consent.

However, nothing will be a substitute for delivering a comprehensive RSE curriculum. In the final part of this consultation document we set out the areas that must be covered by RSE in order to ensure sexual harassment and sexual violence are understood and prevented.

We know from the Estyn report that harmful sexual behaviours are happening in schools now. We are concerned that the incremental introduction of mandatory Relationships and Sexuality Education in secondary schools starting with year seven and eight in 2023 will mean that another whole cohort of existing secondary school students could leave school without having received essential education.



Recommendations:

- Secondary schools are encouraged and supported to develop and deliver lessons around these core issues to the whole school population as soon as possible, regardless of the staged introduction of RSE. Welsh Government funds/supports teacher training, high quality resources for schools and support with curriculum development so that this work can be initiated immediately across all year groups.
- Welsh Government ensures that existing good practice is shared to empower schools and see that it is possible to address these difficult issues.

What support do teachers need?

Brook in England has been commissioned by the Department for Education to carry out research with teachers on what support they need to address peer on peer sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, both within the curriculum and in the whole school environment. This research will inform new guidance for schools on the issue. It is likely that research findings will be familiar and relevant to the experience of teachers in Welsh schools and we will be happy to share the outcomes of our research to help inform Welsh Government as it considers ways in which to support teachers in this important work.

Young people's voices

Whether developing education to prevent sexual harassment and sexual violence, or improving response to incidents in schools it is vital that young people are involved in the conversation.

Recommendation:

- Surveys and formal fact finding research can be useful to find out how students are experiencing school life and what they need to be addressed in lessons.
- Anonymous questions and comments students provide within lessons should be analysed beyond the lesson itself to build a school wide understanding of the issues and concerns that are current for young people.
- Creating fora and groups young people can volunteer to participate in to provide feedback on the RSE and whole school issues.

Education out of school

Some of the most vulnerable young people and some people at risk of committing acts of sexual harassment and violence may be best reached in out of school settings. Youth work has historically provided an excellent context for providing RSE education and information. While the incremental roll out of RSE in schools takes place, it is especially vital that out of school settings are supported to provide



discussion information and support around sexual harassment and violence prevention and support for victims/survivors

Recommendation:

- Invest in training and support for youth workers and professionals in other out of school settings to provide education and support.

5. Arall | Other

