

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 09**

**Ymateb gan: Platffrom**

**Response from: Platffrom**

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Nodwch eich barn mewn perthynas â chylch gorchwyl yr ymchwiliad, sydd wedi'u hysgrifdu yn ôl ym 5 themau sy'n gyswllt â'r termau o'r ymchwiliad, sydd wedi'u grwpio yn ôl ym 5 themau: ymysg gwrthwynebu'r termau o'r ymchwiliad, sydd wedi'u

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

Platffrom is the charity for mental health and social change.

We are a platform for connection, transformation and social change. We're driven by the belief that a strengths-based approach is the foundation to sustainable wellbeing for everyone. We do not believe that people or communities are "broken" or in need of fixing.

Our work takes a trauma informed approach to understanding mental health and emotional distress, and we see the current mental health, and wider health, social care and public sector systems as no longer fit for purpose. Based on illness and deficit models, they deny people the hope and agency to heal.

## **1. Maint | Scale**

We believe that the issue of peer on peer sexual harassment among learners is underreported. Platffrom cannot comment on the prevalence in education settings directly, however as a charity that supports young people's wellbeing we do deal with disclosures of sexual harassment that have happened within the young person's



school setting within a peer relationship. Often these experiences of harassment have started in the school environment but continue outside of school, predominantly through the use of social media and digital devices.

In 2020-21, Platform provided individual wellbeing support and coaching for 720 young people in Wales, of these young people 7% (= 50 young people) reported experiencing sexual harassment. We do not believe that this is an accurate picture, as the information collected does not break the category of sexual harassment down into where this experience had happened and by whom, it relies on looking at the notes and accuracy of recorded information. We believe that it is likely that schools are also not recording this information as accurately as they could be, with many incidents being recorded under a more general category of "bullying".

Young people we have spoken to say that young people feel afraid of raising this issue and often may not recognise that they are experiencing sexual harassment. This leads us to believe that the issue is underreported. We also believe that there is a lack of data collection in respect of statutory and third sector organisations who support young people outside of education settings, and that more could be done to ensure that the information can be captured in a wide range of settings to give a more accurate picture of young people's experiences.

## **2. Effaith | Impact**

Sexual harassment is a form of sexual violence and as a result should be regarded as an adverse childhood experience. All adults have a duty to ensure that children and young people are protected from all forms of violence and abuse. We know that adverse experiences in childhood can have a negative impact on young people's long-term emotional wellbeing and physical health outcomes into adulthood. Peer on peer sexual harassment impacts young people's wellbeing significantly, often these impacts go unnoticed or are not connected to the experience of sexual harassment as this is not always recognised as an issue.

Young people we spoke to said that it impacted on their friendships, confidence, feeling unsafe at school, experiences of anxiety and in some cases led to school refusal and suicidal feelings. Young people we spoke to felt they were unable to raise the issue with school professionals, due to a fear of the consequences and that their concern would not be taken seriously. Young people's learning is impacted as they cannot focus on their studies whilst being hypervigilant to further possibilities of harassment. Sexual harassment can be linked to a wider bullying issue and is not always contained to the education setting only, meaning that through the use of social media and digital platforms, young people are continuing to experience harassment outside of school/college. When this happens, it can also impact on



home life and routines that are vital for wellbeing such as good sleep hygiene and relationships with supportive adults at home.

Platfform believes that feeling safe and secure in school/college, having access to safe and trusted adults as well as positive relationships with peers is vital for wellbeing outcomes. The experience of sexual harassment from a peer, disrupt this safety and can lead to young people feeling and becoming isolated and unsupported. As with anyone experiencing distress or threats, there is a need to find ways of coping and often young people will develop threat responses, such as withdrawing socially, responding with aggression to gain safety, self-harming and thoughts of suicide, controlling their eating, refusing to attend education settings or lose ability to engage with education and staff. Sadly when the root cause of these responses isn't identified the blame for this can be placed on the young person which is detrimental, we must ensure that we are able to identifying the causes of young people's distress. A trauma-informed approach is imperative in order to avoid the medicalisation of young victim's distress (please see Platfform's briefing on borderline personality disorder and the labelling of survivors of abuse and violence <https://platfform.org/policy-and-influence/labelling-survivors-of-abuse-and-violence/>).

Of the 50 young people we identified that had experienced sexual harassment, 96% were female and the remaining young people were questioning their gender identity. This leads us to believe that this issue effects young girls and women disproportionately in line with wider research/evidence into gender-based violence and that young people questioning their gender identity and/or identify as LGBTQI+ are possibly at more risk of these experiences. We have concerns about the impact of peer on peer sexual harassment and it's links to how young girls and women view themselves and their bodies, and in many cases see a potential link between experiencing sexual harassment and controlled eating. Young people we have spoken to said that controlling their eating or their desire to either lose weight or gain weight was a result of wanting to find a way to attract less attention from peers for the appearance of their body. Similarly young people have said that controlling their eating helps them feel more in control in situations where they feel powerless.

As part of our work Platfform delivers wellbeing programme's in schools and colleges and also supports educational professionals in embedding the Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing. We would like to highlight the considerable pressure that schools are under, dealing with an ongoing pandemic, implementing the new curriculum, ALN bill, Whole School Approach and managing their own staff wellbeing. The biggest concern that we have been supporting school staff with is in managing relationships, where they have seen an increase in



difficulties in friendships and peer groups, which also includes issues such as bullying, harassment and managing situations where these concerns spill out onto social media/phone devices where schools have less influence and control. There have been numerous occasions during our work supporting school where we have identified behaviour as sexual harassment, which was not identified/picked up by school staff. Although we have observed a recognition of behaviour being inappropriate, it was not being named as sexual harassment which raises questions around staff and schools understanding, training and confidence in being able to name and tackle this issue.

### **3. Effeithiolrwydd ymyriadau | Effectiveness of interventions**

Platfform believes that there is good guidance in place for schools and welcomes the introduction of mandatory relationships and sexuality education for pupils as part of the new curriculum. We also welcome a children's rights-based approach in education which is crucial.

Platfform would like to see more being done to support staff and pupils to have conversations about relationships, both healthy and unhealthy relationships, including how harm can happen within relationships through issues such as peer sexual harassment. While there is good guidance in place and helpful tools that education settings can adopt such as Brook Cymru's nationally recognised Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool, we are not confident that there is a consistent approach cross schools and colleges. We believe more needs to be done to prevent sexual harassment and this involves having conversations about school culture and listening to the concerns of young people. We recognise that staff may not always feel confident creating these spaces, however there needs to be a culture of openness and willingness to explore these issues which means schools can use and build on the resources they do have and seek the external support they may need.

We believe that the key to implementing changes is in strong leadership and adoption of the Whole School Approach, and being open to challenging conversations about issues that also involve staff such as unconscious bias. We do come across situations where schools can be defensive and are less open to considering that a particular issue exists in their school, this can hinder open and curious conversations that you need in order to see change. We are concerned that peer on peer sexual harassment is being viewed as a smaller problem in comparison to other issues and therefore is sometimes not being addressed when it is disclosed but is also not being pro-actively discussed and prevented.

### **4. Y cyd-destun ehangach | Wider context**



We believe that children and young people are under a considerable amount of pressure which is compounded by social media content. There is pressure to achieve academically, look a certain way to fit with beauty standards, be popular and well liked, display wealth, be successful in sports and extra curricular activities. This pressure is in contrast to the reality of many children and young people's experiences, where many live in poverty, have experienced trauma, inequality, discrimination and are struggling with their wellbeing.

We believe that more needs to be done to educate young people and parents on the unrealistic ideals that are often pushed out on social media and in particular in relation to beauty and sexualised images of young people to be able to help tackle the culture that can perpetuate sexual harassment. We believe this also links to the importance of internet safety and choices, including protecting children and young people from harmful content and pornography. Young people have told us that they want more guidance and opportunities to develop their own thinking about how they explore their identity and push back on some of society's expectations.

We believe that more needs to be done to build schools relationships with families and parents and that more can be done to provide accessible information to them and opportunities to input into school policies and plans. Parents are key to being able to support changes in behaviour and positive responses after incidents occur.

We have seen some excellent examples in schools, for example, one secondary school puts on a regular parents seminar "what every parent needs to know about...", they provide information on a range of topics and invite in professionals to give talks in the field of the chosen topic. More opportunities to share best practice are welcomed to inspire new ways to tackle issues that concern young people and parents wellbeing.

## **5. Arall | Other**

