

# Everyone's Safer: insights from a year tackling harmful sexual behaviour in schools

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## Who we are

**The Lucy Faithfull Foundation** is the only UK-wide charity dedicated solely to preventing child sexual abuse.

Around 1 in 6 children will be sexually abused. Around one third of this is carried out by under-18s. And around 9 in 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser.

We work to stop this.

## How we help keep children safe

**We work to reach** adults and young people to prevent abuse from happening in the first place – and, if it already has, to prevent it from happening again.

Where abuse has already taken place, we work with all those affected, including adult male and female abusers; young people with harmful sexual behaviour; children with concerning sexual behaviours; and victims of abuse and other family members. But we also work with families and with adults and young people where there has been no abuse, to help them keep themselves and others as safe as possible.

We run the **Stop It Now! UK and Ireland helpline**. A confidential service available to anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse, including adults worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviour towards children.

## The Faithfull Papers

**We research** and evaluate our work to make sure what we do protects children, and we share the evidence with professionals and the public. We want to make best use of our expertise, our data and our insights, independently and in partnerships, to develop new strategies and interventions that help keep children safe.

**We advocate** for a greater focus on preventing abuse before it happens and for a public health approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse. The Faithfull Papers are a series of reports showcasing our understanding of what works to protect children to the widest possible audience – to policymakers, journalists, researchers and partner organisations in the UK and overseas.

## Executive summary

In June 2021, Ofsted published its report on the UK government-mandated rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges (1). The report concluded:

*“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.”*

In September 2021 and again in September 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) updated the safeguarding guidance ‘Keeping Children Safe in Education’ (2) to include an increased focus on managing incidents of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) in schools.

HSB can be defined as “developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive” (3).

In 2022, funded by the Home Office, the Marie Collins Foundation and the South West Grid for Learning piloted a HSB Support Service for schools. While short term in nature, the data and insights collected through this helped the Home Office and key partners understand what support is needed for children and young people.

At the same time, our Stop It Now! helpline saw a marked increase in enquiries from education professionals, who were either seeking support in response to specific incidents or looking for help to equip their staff to deal with harmful attitudes and abusive and harassing behaviours amongst students.

Aiming to support effective school leadership responses, we received funding from the KPMG Foundation to undertake a three-year action research project asking:

- What works to respond to and prevent HSB in schools?
- How can we develop whole-school cultures of resilience so that young people feel, and are, safer?

The project began in January 2022 with four main goals: to support schools when an HSB incident occurs and ensure all involved are supported well; to ensure schools benefit from the experience of others; to help statutory agencies understand key issues schools face so they can provide better support; and to share evidence from the project which can contribute to the body of knowledge around tackling and responding to HSB in schools.

In the first year we worked with ten secondary schools and supported staff, students and parents to identify the HSB issues in each setting. We developed bespoke engagement plans and delivered tailored packages of interventions to address the identified issues, including different combinations staff focus groups, staff training, workshops with parents, student focus groups, student education programmes and safety planning work with individual students. These interventions were independently evaluated and several cross-cutting themes were identified.

“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.”

Ofsted report



## Key points

### Causes of harmful sexual behaviour

Several potential causes of HSB were identified by staff and students:

- emotional dysregulation
- experiences of abuse in the home
- sexist attitudes and beliefs
- peer pressure
- poor understandings of consent and healthy/unhealthy relationships
- normalised 'banter' and low-level harassment

### Concerns about harmful sexual behaviour

- Staff and students reported different concerns.
- The differences in how HSB is conceptualised between staff and students may lead to different perspectives upon how it should be addressed.

### Issues identified by staff during initial interviews and focus groups

- Most schools shared three main concerns: image-sharing, understanding consent and the impact of pornography.
- Concerns about students with special educational needs, who are over-represented in the numbers of students displaying and affected by HSB.
- Education staff felt isolated when managing complex incidents, as thresholds to receive statutory service support are high and voluntary sector service provision can be inconsistent.
- Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) has a key role in preventing HSB, but there was a range of levels of confidence and skill in delivering it.

### Issues identified by students during focus groups

- Perceptions and experiences of safety among students varied widely.
- Students generally valued RSHE, but they identified variations in practice among teachers and there were perceptions that RSHE does not reflect the reality of young people's lives
- Students expressed a lack of confidence in available reporting mechanisms within schools and were reluctant to use them.
- There was a clear desire among young people to be part of identifying problems and developing solutions rather than just being told what to do by adults.
- Gender stereotypes and inequalities were of concern to many.

## Identifying, reporting, and responding to HSB

- Many schools emphasised the need to achieve consistency in awareness among students, parents, and school staff about what constitutes HSB and to improve willingness and ability to report and tackle incidents, including through preventative action.

## Recommendations

Primary prevention approaches have been particularly well-received. These are interventions designed for all concerned, not only for those who have existing HSB concerns. Findings from this first year suggest that there is particular value in three approaches.

- Training staff in the **protective behaviours** process so that teachers can empower students to identify and respond appropriately when they or others feel unsafe.
- Delivering **bystander education** directly to students to equip them with knowledge to identify problematic situations and skills to safely intervene.
- Supporting education staff to develop their skills and confidence in delivering active and **participatory RSHE**. However, challenges arise in ensuring that students feel safe and that staff feel willing and capable to elicit student contributions and manage classroom discussions.

This leads us to recommend further exploration and evaluation of these three approaches.

Findings from year one of this project have already provided rich insights into the nature of HSB issues students and education staff face and have helped to identify some promising approaches to address them. However, more questions have arisen and remain than have been answered. These questions will guide our work in years two and three of the project.

## Introduction

In June 2020, a young woman called Soma Sara began sharing her experiences of rape culture on Instagram. An overwhelming number of young people replied to share similar experiences, highlighting the extent of sexual harassment and abuse in UK schools and colleges. In response, Soma founded [Everyone's Invited](#), a charity providing an anonymous platform for survivors to share their stories and delivering specialist education in schools to promote healthy relationships.

Everyone's Invited prompted a cross-governmental response, including an Ofsted rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. Working with 32 schools and colleges over eight weeks, inspectors spoke to more than 900 young people to investigate areas such as safeguarding and curriculum, multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and victims' voices and reporting. The report found:

*"The issue is so widespread that it needs addressing for all children and young people... schools, colleges and multi-agency partners [should] act as though sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening, even when there are no specific reports."*

More broadly, the education sector was asking common questions, including:

- Why are children and young people experiencing harassment and abuse in school?
- What can be done to put things right?
- How can we prevent more children experiencing sexual abuse in school?

Since 1993, we have supported people affected by harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) so were well placed to respond to calls for support. Since the start of Everyone's Invited, our Stop It Now! helpline experienced a marked increase in calls from education professionals seeking support in response to specific incidents or for help to equip their staff to deal with wider school culture issues.

It is widely acknowledged that the evidence base around HSB in schools is scarce, both in terms of its causes and how best to prevent and respond to it. The increased level of responsibility placed upon schools by the DfE to respond to HSB has not yet been matched with increased resources or training.



## Project aims

We wanted to better understand what works to respond to and prevent HSB in schools and how to develop whole-school cultures of resilience so that young people feel, and are, safer.

In September 2021, the KPMG Foundation supported us with funding to undertake a three-year action research project in collaboration with the University of Surrey with three main aims.

- Help schools to respond well when an incident of HSB occurs.
- Produce evidence and insights to influence government and education strategy.
- Make schools safer places for children and young people by preventing HSB.

Working with ten secondary schools each year, the project aims to achieve four outcomes.

- When an incident of HSB occurs within a school, all those involved are supported well – students, parents and carers, and staff.
- Schools benefit from the experience of others (specialist organisations, academics and other schools) and have access to resources when HSB issues arise.
- Statutory agencies understand key issues schools face and provide better support with regard to preventing and tackling HSB.
- Dissemination of resources and evidence gathered through the project contributes to the body of knowledge around tackling and responding to HSB in schools.

## How the project worked

Our action research involved three strands.



### Respond

We gathered data across all participant groups to understand the context and circumstances of each school's experiences of HSB and inform the design of interventions tailored to its needs. This included focus groups, interviews with individuals, online surveys, creative workshops and assemblies.

Where specific incidents of HSB required individual assessments and interventions, we identified the factors that increase the likelihood of displaying or being exposed to HSB and the support needs of these students. We signposted to relevant LFF or external services where necessary to identify where services can help and where there are gaps in provision.



### Learn

We used our early findings from working with the first schools to support later schools and project progression. Notes were taken during every contact with each school and the insights drawn from data analysis formed the basis of the summary reports, capturing the learning from each individual school regarding key issues, concerns, gaps in resources or provision and emerging themes.

Our interim reports are disseminated to government and school stakeholders (DfE, Home Office, Education Scotland, National Association of Headteachers (NAHT)) to summarise the what we have learnt at the end of each year, especially on the themes of sexual harassment, sexual violence, cyber resilience, pornography and consent.



### Prevent

Our interim findings will inform the adaptation, strengthening and creation of guidance needed to address the prevalence of sexual harm in schools, for example, the Department for Education's Keeping Children Safe In Education. Our final report will include recommendations for government to strategically influence governmental responses and we will share what we have learnt regarding the preventative measures schools can implement to make their communities safer. We will develop a suite of resources for schools to use and share them widely with support from our partners (DfE, Ofsted, Home Office).

## How we recruited schools

We recruited ten schools within the West Midlands region during the first year of the project. Participation was voluntary, and an initial visit from the project lead assessed suitability for their inclusion. We developed a project inclusion matrix to consider the type of education setting, local demographics, and the level of self-reported concerns about HSB. This ensured a diverse selection of schools and that findings are applicable for the broadest range of settings across the UK (Figure 1).

Schools outside the scope of the project could access support through our Stop It Now! helpline coupled with up to three hours free consultancy from our specialist practitioners. Through this, we supported an additional 40 schools and some of the themes identified across these calls will feature later in this report.

Figure 1

### Project inclusion criteria



## How we worked with schools

We held initial meetings to assess the HSB issues that each school faced and to plan a bespoke package of interventions based on their needs. This included a combination of support for staff, students, and parents and carers to help them respond to and make sense of sexual harm in their school community, such as:

- consultation to the school on delivering an appropriate welfare-centred response to all children and families affected, including those harmed and those who have harmed
- providing ongoing consultation as staff reviewed protocols, procedures, and physical environments to make their school community safer
- facilitating student and staff focus groups to identify HSB concerns, issues and potential responses
- delivering training and workshops for school staff, students and parents and carers
- developing and providing new resources such as safety planning templates, student workbooks and curriculum materials

In line with the action research approach, we collected and analysed data throughout our time working with the schools, and emerging insights shaped the interventions. We used two online surveys for students and staff to explore their understanding of HSB, perceptions of school safety and confidence in addressing HSB. We also used qualitative data from our interactions with staff and students, focus groups and feedback, and analysis of HSB incident reports, policies and RSHE curriculum plans.

Our approach was based on HSB being both a matter of individual experience and of wider peer and school dynamics, structures and cultures. The analysis focused on participants' perspectives on HSB and its causes within their school contexts and their perspectives on responses to HSB broadly, then specifically in terms of the interventions that we delivered in the schools. We identified insights about the processes by which HSB occurs and the mechanisms through which prevention strategies and responses do and do not have impact.

We wanted to give voice to young people to challenge assumptions and beliefs about HSB and the best ways of preventing and responding to it, including any unforeseen consequences of well-intentioned efforts by adults.

## Key findings

For each of the ten schools that we worked with, we developed a summary report documenting the issues identified and interventions delivered. These can be found in full in the end of year one [report](#).

For the purposes of this shorter paper, we have abridged two case studies to highlight some of the key findings. We then go on to discuss the emerging cross-cutting themes and the promising practice we tested to respond to the identified issues.

## Case study 1

School 01 is an urban, medium-sized co-educational academy with sixth form (ages 11-18). Around 19% of students received free school meals (close to the national average) and 10% came from a minority ethnic group (significantly lower than the national average). The school community reported a high level of HSB concerns.

Our engagement plan for School 01 focused on working with students to identify their concerns and delivering a bystander education programme in response. We also reviewed the school's RSHE curriculum – please see page 18 for a summary of the report provided to the school.

### Student focus group insights

We held a focus group with 14 participants aged 12-15 from the school's Student Council group to explore how safe students felt in school.

#### **Students' perceptions of safety varied widely.**

Most students perceived some threats at school, especially in less regulated spaces that may be beyond the purview of teachers (for example in corridors or during break times). These threats were described as:

*"a bit unpredictable... you never really know what's coming next."*

#### **Students experienced online bullying and harassment.**

Students felt that individuals can hide behind anonymity and can present a different, potentially more unpleasant, self online than they would offline:

*"...people could be really kind in person, but online they think they're never going to be found out so they're really mean."*

Participants also pinpointed pressures and expectations regarding how individuals should look and act online:

*"Especially, like, on social media, you sort of feel like you need to fit the standards, you need to be this otherwise this is going to happen and no-one's going to like you."*

## Participants felt that both men and women are being judged.

The pressure to align with expected standards was acute because "otherwise it's scary that you would be alone." Specifically, thinness and passivity being the expected ideal for girls:

*"...teenage girls, you're expected to be really skinny, really quiet and just a sort of, well in a nice way, be an absolute pushover and just sort of say yes to everything and not really bat an eye."*

Both male and female participants referred to a 'toxic masculinity vibe' whereby boys and men are expected to be stoic and well-built/muscly:

*"Men don't cry and have to be muscly and taller than women. If you're seen as different, then you're like a target to other people."*

While they said that women may find it somewhat easier to be emotionally honest and open compared to men, they felt that women can still be criticised for doing so, for example, others may say that they are overreacting or being hormonal. A participant said that while it may be commonly assumed that women can be more open, this is not what they see in reality:

*"...most statistics say that women express easier, but we also get so much more backlash because we're getting told 'oh you're just being...you're overreacting.' Or I've heard this one so many times: 'so you're just on your period' or something like that, and this is an actual issue that we're feeling that we're going through, and it feels like it's not being taken seriously enough..."*

Men, meanwhile, were thought to be shamed for opening up with people saying that they are "weak."

Participants described there being gender "double standards" at play regarding sexual behaviour, with shaming for any transgressions from expected masculine and feminine gender roles, for example, boys being seen as "gay" if they express "a more feminine side", while girls are called a "slut" for sexual behaviour while "if it's a man, it's like... 'well done'"

They referred to HSB as including verbal harassment, for example, "jokes" or "threats":

*"Constant catcalling, commenting on how someone looks in a sexual manner."*

*"...using gay as an insult often."*

Some participants described boys making "sexualised noise" in school where "they're pretending to have sex and then making those noises up and down the corridors", which they said is "traumatising."

Participants said that supposedly jokey comments do not always feel like jokes but are very normalised:

*"...jokes that aren't really jokes... like I'm going to shove this up your arse..."*

*"...it's said in a hahaha way but actually feels quite threatening."*

There can also be physical behaviours, for example, between boys "boys jumping onto other boys" backs and "making the joke of sexual harassment". The 'joke' here has homophobic undertones according to participants.

### **There were perceptions of teachers not intervening and a normalisation of sexist comments.**

Teachers were described as focusing on girls and not challenging sexist behaviour or comments, which made participants feel unable to challenge it. One participant felt that teachers "don't bother to sort it out or don't have the time to sit down with the children that are doing it and say it isn't right." Some participants were critical of girls being targeted for what they wear and recounted sexualised and victim blaming comments, including from teachers:

*"...my form tutor told me this this morning: "be careful walking up the stairs because you don't want boys to get the wrong idea" because my skirt was slightly shorter than normal, and it felt unneeded and it felt like it was just promoting 'boys will be boys'."*

Participants perceived many teachers to be biased in the way they deliver RSHE and respond to different viewpoints.

*"... like without realising it, the teacher's sexist biases can be seen quite obviously..."*

Focus group data suggested that students view the RSHE curriculum content and teaching style as quite conservative in nature, which may intertwine with sexist attitudes among students, as illustrated by this example shared by a participant:

*"I have an example because it was a lesson, and we were doing about abortion and one of the boys in my class made a comment: 'You're a child killer even if it's from rape' and the girl in front said: 'But it's rape and it's my body, my choice.' And the teacher had a go at the girl because she said my body my choice, not the boy saying child killer."*

### **Participants described feelings of being unable to express themselves.**

There was a sense that it is not safe to go to teachers for help because of fears of being judged. One participant said if "one of my friends got sexually harassed or they felt uncomfortable, I probably wouldn't go to a teacher."

*"... if you have a different belief then you completely get shut down by the teachers..."*

For this participant, the teaching style meant they felt unable to explore complex topics and, in turn, would be unequipped to deal with any experiences, including of abuse:

*"... you cover topics like abortion and stuff. It's like I'm half dreading to cover that topic with my teacher because she says: 'Oh yeah if you're mature enough to have sex then you'll have to deal with the consequences,'" and it's like, what happens if you get raped? That wasn't your choice to be raped so what happens then, do you just have to deal with it?"*



They also want teachers to allow students to express themselves and to explore different opinions and perspectives on topics.

*"... allow everyone to voice their opinion... it should be spoken about more and then challenged and then you debate about it..."*

To deal with HSB, one participant said that "instead of trying to fix it all the time" focus on helping students to "understand [what] we can do", suggesting a student-led approach is preferred.

Noteworthy from this focus group was how staff values and judgments were intersecting with student culture. Participants perceived normalised sexism, homophobia and sexual harassment through verbal comments and non-verbal behaviour. They described gender double standards and shaming, which staff may reinforce through their own shaming and victim blaming. Students then were not feeling safe to express themselves and did not want to report things to teachers. There was also seemingly an 'anti-snitch' culture among students and students did not feel safe to call out or challenge HSB themselves.

## How we developed a response

We developed and delivered tailored interventions designed to address the issues raised in these focus groups and meetings with staff. Staff had identified a desire to harness student motivation to tackle HSB and students expressed a desire to be part of the solution, so we proposed a bystander education programme for students.

### Bystander education programme

We commissioned Dr Gillian Harrop from the University of Worcester to adapt an existing bystander intervention programme that has been delivered to thousands of University of Worcester students since 2016. The concept of bystander intervention (BI) refers to 'bystanders' (a person or people present or witness to, but not directly involved in a situation) taking action, directly or indirectly, to respond to a risky or harmful situation in ways that reduce the likelihood of harm. The theory underpinning BI relates to the power that bystanders have to influence the outcomes of a situation through challenging and/or supporting those present and shaping the social norms that affect the way that individuals behave.

The adapted bystander education programme for School 01's students was delivered by Dr Harrop in school to 80 Year 12 students over six hours with several breaks. It covered definitions of BI, barriers to BI, BI and sexual abuse, BI and domestic abuse and active BI skills. At the end of the session, students were asked to complete an online feedback questionnaire which received 35 responses.



Are you more likely to spot problematic behaviour (defined as sexually harmful attitudes, language or behaviour) after attending the sessions?

**Yes 85.7%**

Has the session made you more likely to intervene when they saw problematic behaviour?

**Yes 94.3%**

This positive feedback from students was also reflected in their free-text evaluation responses. At the end of the presentation students were asked what words they associated with being an active bystander. Twenty-seven students took part in this, producing the following word cloud (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Word cloud produced by the BI programme participation poll



## RSHE curriculum review

School 01's RSHE curriculum was reviewed against the 'Transforming school cultures through participative RSE' guidance for schools (4). Analyses indicated that:

- the curriculum was comprehensive and there were pockets of good practice apparent in the teaching materials
- teaching and learning included some effective participatory methods and used digital media well
- in addition to the imparting of factual information, many lessons also included a focus on skill development, in line with guidance principles

Specific examples of good practice included:

### Year 7

- a balanced and skills-based approach to dealing with online media
- rights-based active citizenship content for 'equality and justice'

### Year 8

- some acknowledgment of the need for 'strategies to deal with problems in a friendship'
- engagement with the factors affecting freedom and capacity to choose regarding consent and practical and skills-based learning for giving and interpreting consent
- myth busting and anti-victim blaming messaging around abuse and inclusion of content regarding why an individual may not leave an abusive relationship or report abuse
- questions about why an individual may behave abusively or disrespectfully to another

### Year 9

- critical engagement with how pornography may affect perceptions and expectations of the self and other
- reflection on beliefs about relationships and how the same behaviour may be defined as healthy or unhealthy and use of case study to explore feelings, behaviours, and thoughts
- comprehensive information about what constitutes abuse

### Year 10

- comprehensive information about what constitutes pornography and reflection on attitudes and beliefs
- integrated approach addressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs about perpetration and experience of abuse

## Year 11

- myth busting about sex and inclusion of content in response to students' requests

However, curriculum and teaching materials seemed to become increasingly legalistic and factual and less focused on contexts of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours as students progress. There were specific examples where practice could be developed.

- Further consideration of the social and cultural barriers to, and facilitators of, healthy and unhealthy relationships, going beyond just what constitutes these relationships to why people may participate in unhealthy relationships and the social and interpersonal pressures at play.
- Teaching about consent involved the 'cup of tea' video, which has been heavily critiqued for not addressing matters of ambivalence and ambiguity, nor the specificities of sexual consent compared to consent in other contexts. There could also have been consideration as to why people may disregard others' rights to consent and the causes of direct and indirect pressure and a reluctance to refuse unwanted sex.
- Within topics like body image and authenticity there could have been further consideration of not just what is and is not realistic, but also the mechanisms through which individuals deem something aspirational or not and the contexts in which value is and is not ascribed to different people.
- While there was some acknowledgment of barriers to intervening and reporting, these issues could have been discussed more consistently and thoroughly across topics.
- Though the participatory methods align with evidence on best practice, there could have been more about connecting the topics to students' current experiences and life stages as well as preparing them for the future. Solutions to challenges could also have been developed with students.

After our engagement ended, we provided a full analysis report to School 01 and we have since gone on to use what we learnt to develop and test a package of twilight teacher training sessions on participatory RSHE facilitation skills with other schools.

## Case study 2

School 08 is a rural, medium-sized co-educational community special school (ages 11-16). Around 45% of students received free school meals (significantly higher than the national average), and 34% came from a minority ethnic group (similar to the national average). The school community reported a moderate level of HSB concerns.

School 08's engagement plan focused on a number of issues. The student cohort has some specific vulnerabilities and needs and the problem of HSB was predominantly framed in terms of incidents and student deficits (for example, a desire for friends, emotional dysregulation). Concerns were raised about parents and multiagency working; the school saw itself as part of a stakeholder network and as needing to work in partnership with parents and other agencies, but identified numerous barriers to effective parent-school partnerships and described systems as "broken". We explored this in more depth during a focus group (summarised below) with key safeguarding staff in order to assess the issues faced.

### Staff focus group insights

We held a focus group with three participants: the Headteacher, the Attendance and Inclusion Officer, and the Assistant Headteacher to explore the issues arising from managing HSB incidents in school.

#### **Staff face significant challenges in responding to daily safeguarding concerns and managing differing stakeholder perspectives.**

The Headteacher described this aspect of the job as taking "at least an hour a day, if not a little bit more", while the Attendance and Inclusion Officer described safeguarding as the entirety of the role. Participants felt that some statutory agencies are supportive and effective and can help with signposting, but that there are challenges in working with others. Common concerns related to feeling that they received poor levels of support, were not listened to and needed to repeat information to different people within the same agencies. They felt they were being criticised at times, and had to navigate different approaches to investigating cases and gathering information. They also identified varying perceptions of seriousness of cases and different perspectives regarding the needs of, and best course of action for, young person and their families. The account provided by the Attendance and Inclusion Officer indicated that sometimes there can be significant struggles after referrals are made to external agencies, which may have jeopardised the quality of the relationship between the school and families and was making them feel "undermined":

*"...instead of getting any support for the young person and family, I think it actually didn't make things better at all. The young person did not get the support and the family didn't feel listened to and it didn't move on at all."*

It was suggested that relationships with the voluntary sector may be better than with statutory services and that the latter may have been hampered in recent years by extensive caseloads and staff

turnover, with some social workers being “out of their depth” to deal with “the level of need of our students, due to their complex needs due to their autism.” (Headteacher).

### **Waiting lists and thresholds for statutory services support were of concern.**

The Headteacher perceived: “an inconsistency of thresholds, everyone’s just firefighting the issues they have, then you’re frustrated because you think they need the help right now, and they’re not getting it.”

Navigating the complexities of multiagency working seemed to require the school pushing back and being bold, with the Headteacher stating that they are “quite bolshy”. For example, if they are asked by the Multiagency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to hold cases that do not meet the thresholds, they will argue that it would be “ineffective” to hold the case. They will also encourage families to “try and get the support they can.” The staff noted the effective working relationship with their early help coordinator though, as well as another noted partner who they described as not imposing “loopholes” and instead “does work with our families and has been really supportive as well” (Attendance and Inclusion Officer).

### **Managing HSB and other complex safeguarding issues has a significant emotional impact upon staff.**

Staff described a number of scenarios which brought to life both the practical and emotional aspects of multiagency safeguarding arrangements. This included a complex case involving a student who initially displayed HSB at school, with additional issues raised around possible abuse and neglect in the home. After 18 months of the referral moving between various children’s social care teams, the young man was diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder and was admitted to a hospital under the Mental Health Act. The school staff reflected that they felt social services did not have the skills or experience to manage such a complex case. Both the Headteacher and the Attendance and Inclusion Officer described feeling “deflated” and the Headteacher said they felt “upset” and started to cry during the focus group, expressing feelings of guilt about previously not recognising just how much these cases can affect staff. The Attendance and Inclusion Officer described themselves as “quite thick-skinned” but as having “not slept a wink” following the sectioning of the young person.

### **There is significant scope to improve communication between agencies when managing incidents of HSB.**

Other cases involving HSB discussed by participants indicate that multiagency working can be experienced as hostile and accusatory in complex cases and that there is scope to improve trust and responsiveness between partners responsible for safeguarding very vulnerable young people. The school wanted to feel “listened to [and] taken seriously” (Headteacher) and believed that multiagency working should be about “trusting us and listening to us and trying to work with us [because] ... we’ve got a very good idea about [young people’s and families’] need and support” (Attendance and Inclusion Officer). More practically, they wanted better communication and liaison.

## How we developed a response

School 08's staff had previously undertaken Protective Behaviours (PBs) training, provided several years ago by their local authority. Staff identified that the training had not only equipped them in their engagement, mentoring and oversight of their students, but also supported better multi-agency working, as other local agencies had received the same training and understood shared terminology. The Headteacher requested refresher PBs training for all staff, and follow-up work to review and refresh the student materials they had been using. Therefore, PBs training was offered not solely in response to the multi-agency issues identified within the focus group, but as a wider approach which we hoped would benefit staff in their work with students, each other and other agencies.

### Protective Behaviours training

In partnership with the Protective Behaviours Consortium, we delivered their one-day 'Introduction to Protective Behaviours' training course to the whole-school team of 48 members of staff. The course included an introduction to the PBs process: a practical approach to personal safety which comprises of two underpinning concepts, two main themes and seven PBs strategies. The training aims to prevent abuse by enabling professionals to develop young people's abilities to identify when they are feeling unsafe and take actions in response, recognising the difficulties they might experience in doing so.

Participant feedback was provided via an online evaluation form and was wholly positive, with the resources and techniques provided being highly valued by teachers, who intended to use them with students in lessons and mentor sessions. The training was valued for creating safe spaces for teachers and students and seems to have offered practical ways to deliver teaching. The trainer/facilitator was well-regarded by teachers.

Furthermore, follow-up meetings with the Headteacher indicated that the training had helped to improve communication and staff cohesion across the whole-school team, offering staff a shared approach to manage concerns. In turn, and over time, it is hoped that this will build staff confidence and enhance their resilience in multi-agency safeguarding referrals/interactions.

## Discussion

We offer the two case studies outlined above to highlight something of the depth of issues schools are experiencing. To capture the breadth of emerging issues, we conducted an analysis of summary reports from all ten schools and these are summarised below. Three areas of promising practice are then identified. This section also includes the project lead's personal reflections on the first year of project delivery and some questions that will guide our further work.

### Cross-cutting themes

#### Causes of HSB

Staff and students identified a range of factors that contribute to HSB, including emotional dysregulation, experiences of abuse in the home, sexist attitudes and beliefs, peer pressure, poor understandings of consent and healthy/unhealthy relationships, normalised 'banter' and low-level harassment, among others. These nuanced observations demonstrated a good awareness of the complexities of HSB and the difficulties in finding 'one-size-fits-all' solutions.

#### Concerns about HSB

Staff and students reported different concerns. Three main concerns were shared among staff from most schools: image-sharing, understanding consent and the impact of pornography. However, these widespread adult concerns were not clearly reflected in the issues that students raised. The differences in how HSB is conceptualised between staff and students may lead to different perspectives upon how it should be addressed.

Interestingly, elements of both 'school climate' and 'school culture' were identified by staff and students. School climate refers to immediate perceptions of safety, as well as willingness to report and to intervene (among staff and students). School culture describes the value systems and norms within the school. It is important to understand both because improving school climate may not necessarily address underlying cultural causes of HSB and the ability to improve school climate may be hampered if the culture is not addressed. In some schools, staff focused more on school climate (perhaps because this is arguably more within their control) and students focused more on school culture and the wider influences that shape it.

#### Issues identified by staff during initial interviews and focus groups

Staff from mainstream and special schools voiced significant concerns for students with special educational needs (SEN) who are over-represented in the numbers of students displaying and affected by HSB. Staff also reported frustration about the lack of appropriate HSB resources available for students with SEN. Staff in numerous schools reported feeling isolated in managing complex incidents as statutory service thresholds are high, and voluntary sector service provision can be inconsistent. RSHE was viewed as a key vehicle for the prevention of HSB but differing levels of staff confidence and skill were openly acknowledged.



## Issues identified by students during focus groups

Broadly, concerns raised in student focus groups relate to the varying perceptions and experiences of safety among participants. Students valued RHSE, but they identified constraints to address problems due to perceptions that RSHE is insufficiently reflective of the reality of young people's lives and due to variation in practice among teachers. They were especially concerned about the delivery of RSHE by teachers who are not trained or are uncomfortable teaching the subject. Young people told us that they did not trust, so were not willing to use, available reporting mechanisms within schools. There was a clear desire among young people for a more active and participatory skills-based learning as part of the RSHE curriculum, to empower them to be part of identifying problems and developing solutions, rather than just being told what to do by adults. Gender stereotypes and inequalities were of concern to many participants.

## Identifying, reporting, and responding to HSB

Several schools emphasised the need to achieve consistency in awareness among students, parents, and school staff about what constitutes HSB and to improve willingness and ability to report and tackle incidents. From the students' perspectives, reporting HSB seems hampered by cultural implorations against 'snitching' on peers but also by concerns about confidentiality and risks of being judged or the situation being mismanaged by teachers (or, at least, managed in ways that cause problems for students). The data highlighted the importance of equipping students with the tools, skills, and emotional literacy required for navigating these realities in ways that feel possible and safe for them to do so, consistent with a recognition that adults are unlikely to be able to completely solve the problems in a top-down approach. Students in the focus groups wanted to play an active role and spoke extensively about how interventions need to connect with the realities of their lives and provide them with opportunities for participatory learning and for collaboratively identifying and solving problems.

## Promising practice

These themes guided the choice of interventions suggested to schools: it was clear that we needed to test approaches that directly equipped staff and students with the knowledge and skills to prevent HSB, not just respond to it. In implementing and evaluating different approaches, we can now highlight the following areas of promising practice, based upon the post-intervention feedback received from schools.

### Protective Behaviours training

Two whole-school teams (from School 08, as described in Case Study 2, and School 09 whose feedback is reported [here](#)) provided evaluations after receiving introductory PBs training. It was evident that the training they received was highly valued for a broad range of reasons. In addition to widespread applications in their direct work with students, staff also noted the importance of sharing common principles and terminology with their own colleagues and those from other agencies. Staff identified benefits in understanding the protective behaviours process for their own wellbeing and resilience when managing HSB incidents and wider safeguarding issues. Perhaps most significantly for this research, staff stated that protective behaviours can support youth-led action to tackle HSB.



It is rights-based and links to privacy and personal boundaries, using choice, control, and time limits as integral to managing these boundaries. It reinforces that if a young person describes feelings of being unsafe these should not be denied or trivialised and if a person feels that a behaviour is harmful then it should be addressed on that basis.

Given this positive feedback, there is scope to position the programme as a way of helping young people develop and practice self-awareness, empathy, and critical awareness of the intra- and inter-personal dimensions of sex and relationships. There are wide-ranging applications of the practical skills which are developed by PBs work. These skills extend beyond the issue of HSB in schools and could help to equip students for their whole life-course.

### Bystander education

By the end of the first year, we had only delivered the adapted bystander education programme in one school (School 01, as outlined in Case Study 1) but have since delivered in a second school with similarly positive feedback from students. This suggests that there is potential for bystander education delivered directly to students to impact both school climate and school culture. This happens when students are empowered to intervene in any given situation, and also to affect the likelihood of future situations arising by changing what is deemed acceptable and appropriate in school.

Academic research suggests that bystander education must involve an integrated approach that addresses awareness and recognition, skills, empathy, and social norms. Such an approach cannot just impart bystander education but must also address the normalisation of harmful behaviour and raise awareness about its causes and effects. There is a strong socio-emotional dimension to bystander intervention with evidence to suggest that young people may recognise risky or harmful behaviours and situations but may feel unable to act because of social norms that deter intervention. We recommend that bystander education and a participatory approach to RSHE must go hand-in-hand.

### Participatory RSHE

All schools mentioned RSHE in their engagement plans or focus groups. Research evidence attests to young people's desire for active and participatory approaches to RSHE. This may conflict with wider principles within school environments when teaching typically takes the form of a teacher imparting correct knowledge to students.

Participatory RSHE involves active discussion and deliberation among students rather than a teacher telling them the information or predetermining what is the right and wrong way to think, feel and behave. An active and participatory approach is particularly important for new and emerging issues about which teachers might lack necessary expertise, insight and credibility among students, for example, online sexual cultures and behaviours.

It is important that RSHE educators are skilled, knowledgeable, and effective as facilitators, where RSHE is structured and students are offered education in critical thinking, perspective taking, and communication skills to ensure that debate and discussion within the classroom takes place sensitively, inclusively, and constructively. Such education should be a pre-requisite to studying the specific topics, particularly more sensitive and contested topics, and should be incorporated throughout the RSHE curriculum.

There are legitimate questions about how this can be achieved within current school environments. RSHE clearly holds scope to play a key role in both the management and prevention of HSB, yet it could be argued that its value is not yet fully recognised in terms of its inclusion in teacher training, continuing professional development, and accredited qualifications for students. Is there a need then for specialist RSHE teachers or more consistent use of expert specialists? These and other questions are considered in Section 5 of the full report. In response, we have started to develop some teacher training workshops to explore what RSHE could look like and to practice some of the skills required to manage complex classroom dynamics and handle sensitive conversations.

## Project lead's reflections

Our project lead, Laura Nott, summarised her experiences of working in schools during the first year of project delivery.

*"Schools' willingness to work with us demonstrates both a real commitment to tackling HSB but also a real need for support to do so. The increased focus upon HSB in schools is necessary but there has not yet been a sufficient increase in training and resources, nor an acknowledgement of the practical and emotional impact upon staff of managing such complex situations.*

*"The heavy weight of these issues is also carried by students, some of whom are dealing with significant trauma as a result of HSB. Most students I spoke to communicated a real sense of injustice around gender inequality and sexual harm. However, I have also been left with an equal, if not greater, sense of optimism amongst students and their desire to find solutions. At LFF we are clear that no child is ever responsible for preventing abuse, and is never responsible for any sexual harm they experience. Students understand this, yet still want to be empowered to gain more skills and knowledge to help them navigate their relationships.*

*"Parents and carers expressed their commitment to help keep their children safe, but often lack confidence in how to do so. We were only able to engage a small number of parents so in future years we will focus on how better to support parents/carers to support their children.*

*"Our learning was further enhanced by insights gained from working with an additional 47 schools who fell outside the project's remit. Outcomes from this work included the development of a new schools' webpage, the creation of new safety plan templates and a number of twilight workshops for staff and parents.*

*"Reflecting on the findings of our first year has revealed the depth and breadth of insights gained. We hope that sharing this learning will already help schools, yet we acknowledge how much more work remains to be done and relish the opportunity to do so."*

## Recommendations for further work

More questions have arisen for this first year of project delivery than have been answered, which will guide our future work.

### How can teachers be better supported to deliver effective RSHE?

It is important for school leaders and teachers to have discretion in designing and delivering an impactful curriculum. Though using specialist teachers or experts to deliver RSHE delivery might be effective, the wider staffing body still need buy-in because of the significance of language, attitudes, and responses among all staff during all interactions with students. There are questions about how and when teachers receive training and support to deliver RSHE, and how this can be improved.

### How can students be engaged in identifying and solving HSB issues?

HSB takes various forms and the underlying causes are complex, so that best practice involves students playing an active role in identifying and solving problems. But it isn't clear how students can be constructively and inclusively involved in ways that schools are content with.

### What is the role of adults and students?

Adults can enable or exacerbate issues around HSB, specifically by perpetuating harmful attitudes and over-focusing on particular types of young people or issues instead of the concerns or priorities of young people.

There are also valid concerns about the role that children and young people should take, with a danger that students could be held unfairly responsible for preventing their own abuse. How do we achieve a healthy balance where staff, students and parents/carers are empowered to address HSB together?

### How can HSB reporting rates be addressed and improved?

Improving reporting rates and responses to incidents seems to be hampered by factors relating to school and student cultures. There is a question regarding the extent to which HSB will be solved through reporting to adults given students' identified reluctance to 'snitch'. Perhaps instead we need to further explore giving students tools to deal with problems themselves, where appropriate. These tools need to be realistic and applicable for use in the reality of young people's day-to-day peer contexts; namely, young people need to feel safe and willing to take action, for example, regarding bystander intervention.

## **How can interventions address the influence of wider social ecosystems?**

What young people learn about sex and relationships is influenced by factors other than their school and teachers, for example the media, families and wider communities. This needs to be taken into account for any successful intervention.

## **What does an effective 'whole-school approach' require?**

A specific issue includes the implications of safeguarding and referral policies for responding to HSB, in light of young people's concerns about confidentiality and escalation. There may be counterproductive effects of policy and protocol which inhibit reporting rates and missed opportunities to listen and gather insights about issues affecting students on an informal level. A whole school approach requires consistency across policy and practice but also a recognition of the intersections between policies and practices to avoid unintended consequences.

## Conclusions and next steps

This first year of the project has provided rich insights into the nature of the HSB issues that students and education staff face, identifying some cross-cutting themes across schools and some issues individual to specific settings.

Teachers have shared their concerns about image-sharing, consent and the impact of pornography. They are worried about students with additional needs being over-represented in the numbers of students displaying and affected by HSB, and suggest that systems are “broken”, leaving them feeling isolated in managing incidents.

Students told us that they care about HSB and want to be part of the solution, but that reporting mechanisms matter and they won't use them if they don't trust them. Staff and students alike identified the huge potential of RSHE to prevent HSB as part of a wider whole-school approach. In different but similar ways, they told us that who teaches RSHE and how it is taught determines the value of those lessons.

Parents report a lack of confidence in how to help keep their children safe, especially online.

The evaluation of the interventions delivered to address these issues has helped to identify some promising approaches: protective behaviours, bystander education and participatory RSHE. Our recommendations include further testing of these approaches in the second and third year of the project.

Delivery in the second cohort of ten schools is well underway, and findings arising from these interventions will be shared in March 2024. Initial engagement plans focus more this year on staff needs of training, supervision and support. The secondary harms that education staff can face when dealing with HSB have been raised, alongside the first reports that we have received of primary harms to teachers who have been victims of sexual assaults by students. It will be interesting to see if this early focus continues across the rest of the year and what other issues emerge. A final project report summarising what we have learnt from all 30 project schools across the full three years of the project is due for publication in March 2025.

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