

# Everyone's safer:

supporting effective leadership responses  
to harmful sexual behaviour in schools

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An interim report on the findings from the project's second year  
(January - December 2023)



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Appendix one: LFF’s submission to the DfE’s call for evidence regarding the Keeping Children Safe in Education policy

Appendix two: LFF’s submission to DfE’s consultation for the Review of the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education statutory guidance



# Executive summary

This interim report summarises the key findings from the second year of our three-year action research project. It can be read as an addendum to the more detailed [report](#) published after the first year of the project, which outlined the research methods, ethical approval, school recruitment process and data analyses.

## Context

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (LFF), via our Stop It Now UK and Ireland helpline, gives support to anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse. Following the publication of Ofsted's rapid review report in June 2021, there was a marked increase in enquiries from education professionals, either seeking support in response to specific incidents of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) or for help to equip their staff to consider their whole-school approach to the prevention of HSB. (Ofsted, 2021).

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

**Respond:** to help schools to respond well when an incident of harmful sexual behaviour occurs

**Learn:** to produce evidence and insights to influence government and education strategy

**Prevent:** to make schools safer places for children and young people by preventing harmful sexual behaviour

## What we did

### Interventions delivered

We conducted initial visits to 10 schools in the West Midlands and surrounding counties, working with staff, students and parents to identify the HSB issues in each setting. We developed bespoke engagement plans and tailored packages of interventions to address the identified issues.

Interventions were delivered by LFF's schools project lead and LFF specialist practitioners and included different combinations of staff training, staff focus groups, work with parents, student focus groups, student education programmes and safety planning work with individual students. The evaluation of interventions was led by Dr Emily Setty at the University of Surrey.

Ten summary case study reports were written on the work carried out in each school, and an analysis of the cross-cutting themes was generated.

## What we found

### Cross-cutting themes

1. Safeguarding the safeguarders: how to ensure that Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) teachers are adequately and effectively supported to undertake their jobs safely and in ways that uphold the wellbeing of both themselves and of the children and young people with whom they work.
2. Maximising the impact of RSHE content and pedagogy: in terms of what is taught, how, and with what objectives.
3. Supporting parents and carers to support their children: how to develop effective relationships between schools, parents/carers and children.



## Promising practice

Our evaluation of the interventions delivered across the ten schools identified areas of promising practice for schools and multi-agency safeguarding partners.

### Safeguarding the safeguarders

- Listening to DSLs about the challenges of safeguarding and ensuring they have the necessary space and support structures to work effectively
- Examples of how to maximise multi-agency safeguarding relationships using relationship-based practice

### RSHE content and pedagogy

- Principles from the 'Real Respect' programme as examples of 'the what' and 'the how' of effective RSHE. Real Respect is a Home Office Safer Streets funded project which aims to improve the emotional wellbeing of young people and develop their understanding of healthy relationships.

### Supporting parents and carers to support their children

- Reflecting on a school-parent-student initiative using three-way communication methods.

## Conclusions

The findings from year two are consistent with what we learnt in the first year of the project, while extending and deepening the evidence base. The organic shift in focus from issues faced by students to issues faced by staff emphasised the pressing need to 'safeguard the safeguarders' and to consider what DSLs really need to fulfil their increasing responsibilities. Our evidence demonstrates that what DSLs really need is time, training and support. This is especially significant when we consider the pivotal role that DSLs play in preventing, responding to and remediating incidents of HSB in schools.

We identified in year one that a knowledge-practice gap exists, whereby students may be able to absorb and reproduce the factual information taught in RSHE lessons, without any guarantee of behaviour change. Students and staff acknowledge the need to move towards a 'tools not rules' curriculum to enable skills practice. We have highlighted the 'Real Respect' programme as promising practice in both content and pedagogy, offering it as an example of effective RSHE.

Finally, the need to work in effective partnerships with other agencies and with parents and carers reflects a recognition that schools cannot solve the problem of HSB alone. Partnerships need to be supportive and tailored to the needs of the families within particular school communities. To achieve consistent messaging at school and at home, we have identified examples of three-way communication in school-parent-student initiatives.

## Next steps

All ten year three schools have been recruited and the majority of planned work has already been delivered. Findings from year three will be shared in a final project report in June 2025.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Context

A significant catalyst of this work took place in June 2020, when 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.” (OFSTED, 2021)**

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 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 Department of Education (DfE) to respond to HSB has not yet been matched with increased resources or training.

## 1.2 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 harmful sexual behaviour occurs.**
- **Produce evidence and insights to influence government and education strategy.**
- **Make schools safer places for children and young people by preventing harmful sexual behaviour.**

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

- When an incident of harmful sexual behaviour 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 harmful sexual behaviour issues arise.
- Statutory agencies understand key issues schools face and provide better support with regard to preventing and tackling harmful sexual behaviour.
- Dissemination of resources and evidence gathered through the project contributes to the body of knowledge around tackling and responding to harmful sexual behaviour in schools.



## 2. What we did

In the first year of the project we recruited ten schools as research sites, working with them across the calendar year in 2022. A broad and diverse range of school settings, locations, sizes and demographics were recruited, using an eligibility matrix. We published a full report outlining our approach and findings from this work in June 2023.

In year two, we recruited a further ten schools using the same eligibility matrix. This year we intentionally over-represented special schools and Pupil Referral Units so that we could focus on the additional needs of these students and explore any potential implications these needs may have for the staff who teach and safeguard them.

### 2.1 School profiles

To protect the anonymity of schools, we have not listed the exact number of students and have categorised school size.

School setting	Number of students
small specialist	under 100
medium specialist	over 100
small	under 1000
medium	1000-1500
large	over 1500

To analyse the local demographics of each school's community, we used the government's 'Rural Urban Classification' data to describe the school's geographical setting. We also used the DfE's 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics' (academic year 2022/23) national statistics as a baseline for comparative data. We used the percentage of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) as an indicator of some of the wider socio-economic demographic factors within the school community.

In 2022/23, 23.8% of students across the UK were eligible for free school meals, up from 22.5% in 2022. This represents over 2 million students. Using this baseline, we have reported the percentage of students eligible for FSM at each school.

This data also indicates that in 2022/23, 35.7% of UK students came from a minority ethnic group (MEG). Using this as a baseline, we have reported the percentage of students from any minority ethnic group. Guidance from the DfE (2018) instructed schools to no longer collect student nationality and country of birth data for the school census from autumn 2018 onwards. It has, therefore, been difficult to find standardised measures of the ethnic diversity of school communities.

However, we wanted to ensure that this important demographic information was captured and considered, so we have used ethnic group data from the Census 2021 to look at the ethnic diversity of the borough or county in which the school is located. This is a blunt measure and might not present a fully accurate picture, but we hope that it gives some indication of the ethnic diversity within and between schools.





School code	Setting	Size	Demographics
11	Academy alternative provision, sponsor-led, co-educational, 11-16	Small specialist	Urban with significant rural 50% FSM 17.8% MEG
12	Academy alternative provision, sponsor-led, co-educational, 11-16	Small specialist	Urban with significant rural 37.9% FSM 19% MEG
13	Alternative education provider, co-educational 10-19 (charity)	Medium specialist	Urban with major conurbation % FSM not recorded 48% MEG
14	SEMH special school, co-educational, 4-16	Small specialist	Urban with major conurbation 65.2% FSM 18% MEG
15	Community school, co-educational 11-16	Small	Large rural 25.7% FSM 9.9% MEG
16	Academy converter, co-educational 11-18	Medium	Urban with significant rural 24.2% FSM 28.2% MEG
17	Generic special school, co-educational 11-19	Medium specialist	Urban with city and town 48.3% FSM 28.2% MEG
18	Academy sponsor-led, co-educational 11-18	Medium	Urban with significant rural 28% FSM 11% MEG
19	MLD* special school, academy sponsor-led, co-educational, 11-19	Medium specialist	Urban with city and town 37.7% FSM 8% MEG
20	Academy converter, co-educational 11-18	Large	Urban with significant rural 31.3% FSM 8.5% MEG

\* MLD = Moderate learning difficulty

## 2.2 Interventions delivered

As with the first year of the project, there were varying degrees of difference between the package of interventions planned and those that were successfully delivered. The planned interventions were designed to address the issues that staff, students and/or parents or carers raised during initial school visits.

Not all planned interventions were delivered, for a range of reasons including timetabling clashes, school staff absence or the project contact leaving the school, or lack of time to deliver before the project year-end. In almost all schools, there were interventions that were planned but not delivered (represented below as P). A successfully delivered intervention is represented below as D. This highlights the complexity of working in busy schools where staff are under pressure to manage competing priorities.

Activity/school	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Staff training	D	D			P	P	P			P
Staff focus group	D	P	D			P	P	P		
Student education						P				D
Student safety plans	D	P	P	P		D		D		
Student focus group			D		P			P		D
RSHE curriculum/ policy review				P	D		D	P		
Bespoke resource development		D	D							D
Beyond referrals HSB audit							D			
Parent survey				P						
Parent engagement	D			P	P	P				D

This table shows that the majority of the planned work was delivered in three settings: schools 11, 13 and 20. Some planned work was delivered in schools 12, 15, 16, 17 and 18, while none of the planned work was delivered in schools 14 or 19. Contact was lost with the headteacher at school 14, despite numerous attempts to make plans to deliver the work. The contact at school 19 went on long-term sick leave before the engagement plan was finalised, and no replacement contact could be established.



## 2.3 A sample case study report

Summary case study reports have been developed for each school. A sample report is featured below to provide a snapshot of the work and reports delivered.

### School 17

This is a generic community special school (11-16) of medium size, based in an urban city and town area. Among the school's students, 48.3% received free school meals (significantly higher than national statistics), and 28.2% came from a minority ethnic group (slightly below national statistics). The school community reported a moderate level of HSB concerns.

The student cohort in this school has some specific vulnerabilities and needs. The engagement plan indicates that the school recognised its 'zero tolerance' HSB policy may not have been fully understood by, and therefore effective for, its students; a review of this policy was delivered by an LFF practitioner who specialises in working with HSB in children and young people with additional needs. The policy and procedures were adapted to include clearer and more concrete language and instructions, more inclusive terminology and more realistic, achievable expectations.

School staff were already adopting a contextual approach to some of the HSB issues that had previously arisen, leading to some 'hot-spot mapping' work carried out around the school grounds. A walk-around visit by two LFF practitioners helped staff to build upon this approach and also to consider situational prevention principles. This helped to identify areas where HSB incidents were more likely to occur and to identify strategies to reduce future risks, such as changes of usage in areas of the playground and the provision of resources to distract and occupy students in areas where self-soothing has sometimes developed into more sexualised behaviours.

For more information on situational prevention, please see LFF's recently published [Faithfull Paper](#) (Allardyce et al, 2024)

A 'Beyond Referrals' audit was also conducted with LFF practitioners and the school's DSL. Using the University of Durham's self-assessment guidance and tool, a report was developed to identify areas of good practice, areas for development and potential areas of concern against five domains: systems and structures, prevention, identification, response and intervention and cultural context. School staff fed back how useful this exercise was: the strengths-based approach of the tool ensured that staff did not experience this as a critical or judgemental exercise and instead more of a positive and constructive undertaking. Suggestions were implemented and evaluated in a follow-up visit as having been effective.

A staff focus group to explore stressors and support needs was planned, the findings of which would have helped inform a series of twilight training sessions to support staff in managing the emotional impact of safeguarding in their context.

A portion of the identified work was completed, and follow up intervention has been offered.

# 3. What we found

## 3.1 Cross-cutting themes

A thematic review of the issues arising within the year two engagement plans identified three key challenges faced by schools, shaped by each school's unique context. These challenges related to:



1. Safeguarding the safeguarders.



2. Maximising the impact of RSHE content and pedagogy: in terms of what is taught, how, and with what objectives.



3. Supporting parents and carers to support their children. Including through three-way relationships between schools, parents/carers and children, based on consistent messaging.



### Safeguarding the safeguarders

As found in the first year of the project, the schools in the project's second year described challenges connected to safeguarding, referring both to preventative safeguarding through RSHE and to responsive safeguarding when reacting to incidents and risks of harm. Additionally, schools also put in place interventions after incidents, designed to improve future safeguarding. Schools are acting as first-line responders because of their immediate exposure to the incidents, and responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of students. All schools took their duties seriously and the engagement plans suggested that these duties could be practically and emotionally burdensome due to the commitment of school staff to their students and the complexities of the causes and contexts of HSB among students that they are being called upon to prevent, respond to and remediate.


The challenges were context specific. Some year two schools described dealing with cohorts and contingents of young people whereby, from the perspective of the schools, risks and needs were heightened. For example, staff at School 11 described their students as typically having elevated additional needs and extensive documented adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which were deemed to be impacting the students' perceptions and experiences of healthy and unhealthy sex and relationships. Staff were also concerned about peer group dynamics and risks of criminalisation and victimisation affecting their students. Within this context, there was a concern for staff wellbeing arising from the demands for safeguarding amidst stretched resources and high levels of staff sickness and absence. The engagement plan for School 15 outlined a similar set of challenges connected, in their case, to the perceived impacts of the forced settlement of the travelling community, to which many of their students belonged, pertaining to issues with parental mental health, unemployment, financial deprivation, and substance use.



Consistent across all schools was recognition that staff wellbeing is vital for, but also potentially impacted by, safeguarding. Staff, particularly those with direct leadership responsibilities for safeguarding, need to feel capable and supported to respond to risk and harm.

As outlined further in the next section, there was evidence that if staff feel they do not have the time, training and support to undertake their safeguarding duties then they and/or the students for whom they are responsible may suffer, with detrimental consequences to keeping children and young people safe. Safeguarding can take a significant toll, including in terms of adverse consequences deemed to arise if safeguarders were to make an error and if there is a perceived lack of institutional support. A key consideration in year two has therefore related to putting structures and systems in place to enable them to do their jobs effectively – what we call ‘safeguarding the safeguarders’

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### **RSHE content and pedagogy: the what and the how of participatory RSHE**

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In year one, we identified that RSHE is potentially a key vehicle for the prevention of HSB, through tackling the underlying causes of the behaviours and raising awareness among young people about what constitutes HSB so they are equipped to identify, report and respond to the behaviours that they may see or experience. With the right approach to building dialogue between educators and students within RSHE, young people may be more likely to tell adults in school about HSB which can improve adult understanding about the issues faced by young people and their safeguarding responses. A continued theme across both years of the project is ensuring that RSHE is maximally effective in terms of these aims and objectives, with the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of teaching RSHE continuing to be a priority for schools to get right.

The consultation work leading to the development of the engagement plans indicated challenges for year two schools to ensure RSHE:

- content resonates with young people and addresses the pertinent issues surrounding HSB from their perspectives

- styles of teaching and learning are participatory, active and engaging and impactful for young people

Given the extensive normalisation of HSB and associated contexts and cultures among young people, RSHE must challenge students’ perceptions and practices in ways that resonate. For example, School 15 described how a “culture of toxic masculinity” is impacting upon students’ views and behaviour and is becoming normalised among some students.” The engagement plan identified a need to “create a whole school culture of safety and respect” including through a review of the RSHE curriculum to respond to student issues and be more participative and student led.’ It was stated that this review needed to be based upon student consultation to ‘identify key issues.’ Other engagement plans also referred to the need to identify students’ perspectives and experiences and to empower them to participate and act in solving the issues. For example, School 17 referred to situational prevention approaches including mapping ‘school hotspots where HSB incidents often take place’ to inform preventative responses, while School 20 aimed to explore how best to ‘empower students to lead [a] community change campaign.’ Reflecting the emphasis on a knowledge-based curriculum for RSHE, School 16 referred to a recent Ofsted recommendation for ‘more input on consent’ with the engagement plan emphasising that students should be consulted about their existing knowledge and knowledge gaps in order to shape RSHE.

A knowledge-based curriculum will not in itself resolve HSB, given that HSB is not solely determined by knowledge (or lack of) but is multifactorial and relating also to social norms, attitudes, beliefs and skills. Adult-led approaches that involve lecturing young people about what is deemed appropriate and acceptable may lack impact if it is interpreted as not reflective of the realities that young people face or as being unhelpful for overcoming the challenges they experience in their peer contexts. In School 11, for instance, it was noted that the perceived desire among young people to “fit in” and “belong” with peers, coupled with a fear of rejection and poor emotional regulation, may result in HSB being tolerated or normalised. Within this context, just informing young people about what constitutes HSB will not necessarily be sufficient to creating the conditions required to address the underlying causes of the problem at either an individual, social or cultural level. Instead, the content and pedagogy

must enable young people to co-identify the issues and develop and practice skills and outlooks required to create change.

In School 13, there was explicit recognition within the engagement plan of how a mismatch between staff and student perspectives on the nature and cause of HSB may hinder effective RSHE. In this case, staff considered HSB to be a form of violence against women and girls; yet there was concern that young people’s perspectives and experiences may be giving rise to some resistance toward the idea that girls are victims and boys are perpetrators, which the engagement plan described as potentially “disempowering to all genders.” Though we know that HSB is a gendered issue, young people told facilitators that they needed to grapple with the nuances and complexities of the issues to better understand them, such as HSB in same-sex relationships, girls who display HSB and boys as victims. Perspectives such as these highlight the need to consider how to effectively educate about complex and contested matters relating to gender and HSB, without young people perceiving and experiencing the messaging to be one-dimensional or stereotypical. As discussed further in the next section, there was evidence from this school that highly skilled external facilitators may be well placed to deliver education that challenges young people in impactful ways that resonate with rather than alienate them.



**Supporting parents and carers to support their children**

Schools cannot solve the problem of HSB alone. In the first year of this project, we argued that HSB needs to be contextualised as a multifactorial public health challenge and the response needs multiagency, partnership working. Consistent with this was an emphasis in the year two engagement plans on the need for supportive partnerships between schools and families, tailored to the needs of families within each school community.

There were two notable dimensions to this emphasis: first, consideration of potential risk factors specifically in terms of family-related ACEs such as domestic abuse in the home, and second,

on families as needing to be actively involved in imparting consistent messages and standards for behaviour within the home, as a way of strengthening the action taken by schools. Parents and carers were not directly consulted as part of year two data collection and so these perspectives come from the schools; parents and carers may have alternative perspectives that would need to be considered. Likewise, any assessment of family-related risk factors affecting young people in general from the perspective of these schools will inevitably be shaped by the perceptions and unique experiences of staff within the schools and so should be taken as indicative of the needs and challenges of the schools, as perceived and experienced by them.

Regarding family risk factors, several engagement plans explicitly noted the impact of families on students’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. These impacts were deemed to lead to increased likelihood of enacting HSB, experiencing HSB and normalising. For example, School 11 was concerned that students may not understand what healthy relationships and sex looks like as a result of ACEs within the home (for example, ‘high numbers of students have been affected by parental domestic abuse which models sexist attitudes and behaviour’), with the effectiveness of any school-based intervention or action being limited if not coupled with ‘supporting parents to support their children and reinforce positive messages at home.’ As outlined above regarding ‘safeguarding the safeguarders,’ it was recognised here that parents need support from education staff and multiagency partners to be able to act in ways consistent with schools. Similar challenges were documented in School 15’s engagement plan.

In recognition of the need for an inclusive, consultative and constructive approach to engaging parents, School 16’s engagement plan included an action to survey parents to assess main needs, as a way of helping to devise actions that “increase [parents’] confidence in talking to their children about respect, equality and online safety.

In School 20, there was emphasis on student-led activities to ‘support parents to support their children to feel safer, in creative and engaging ways’. This approach is consistent with School 20’s interest in empowering students to lead a community change campaign outlined above, with the next section discussing the nature and impact of these efforts.



## Summary and reflections

The issues identified in the engagement plans from year two are consistent with the challenges faced by schools identified in year one. The emphasis on the need to ‘safeguard the safeguarders’ demonstrates that schools are staffed by human beings who care deeply for their students while being called upon to navigate, respond to and cope with demands and expectations that may compromise their ability to undertake safeguarding as effectively as possible. The engagement plans identified a need to consider how best to support those involved in safeguarding, with the following section outlining potential best practice based upon the year two activities and interventions.

The acknowledgment that RSHE needs to be carefully designed and delivered in order to resonate with students in ways that meaningfully impact their behaviour and experiences is consistent with extensive studies attesting to the difficulties of achieving impact through RSHE. It has long been identified (and was noted in year one), that RSHE lacks impact amidst a ‘knowledge-practice’ gap whereby students may be able to absorb and reproduce factual information conveyed to them within RSHE, but that behaviour change is not guaranteed without ensuring that RSHE engages with the pertinent issues affecting young people and also addresses attitudes, beliefs, social norms and skills.

Some engagement plans identified problems connected to challenging normalisation and addressing gender dynamics without unduly stereotyping about or alienating young people. These challenges are common across contexts at the current time and require careful consideration by adults involved in preventative safeguarding through RSHE. In Section 3.2 we outline a case study example of a tertiary educational intervention designed for those identified as involved in HSB, which follows several principles of good practice that could be adapted for use as a general preventative intervention for all students.

Finally, the need to work in partnership with parents reflects a recognition that schools cannot solve the problem of HSB alone, but that the partnership needs to be supportive and tailored to the needs of the families within particular school communities. There may be particular challenges engaging with families whereby there may be abuse occurring in

the home and/or other patterns of disadvantage, while in general, schools potentially experience difficulties in developing school-home partnerships in terms of consistent messaging and modelling of behaviour. There is a need to consider which families are identified as at risk and why, coupled with critical reflection on what, exactly, families are being asked to do in terms of establishing messages, rules and behaviours at home. For example, evidence suggests that the common request from schools for parents to restrict and monitor their children’s use of mobile and other digital devices is not fully evidence-based because of the potential counterproductive, albeit typically unintended, consequences such as damage to trust, increased secrecy, and removal or concealment of material by young people (Ghosh, 2018).

## 3.2 Promising practice

After our initial research to develop the engagement plan for each school and an analysis of all the plans to identify cross-cutting issues, we then looked at what practical work might address those themes and tested a range of interventions.

Insights into promising practice to respond to and address the issues identified in the engagement plans were gained through:

- interviews with DSLs designed to explore their perspectives on the challenges of safeguarding and the support they have and would find helpful
- interviews with school nurses, which covered the opportunities and challenges of partnership working for safeguarding, with implications for effective safeguarding
- an examination of the ‘Real Respect’ programme, designed as a targeted intervention for young people identified as involved in or affected by HSB, with scope to reshape as a primary prevention model
- reflecting on a school-parent/carer-student initiative: an afterschool club designed to harness ‘student voice’ through creative methods including a short film and social media campaign

## Safeguarding

Interviews with two members of staff at School 11 (the DSL and a classroom teacher) suggest that there are significant issues with special educational needs and emotional/mental health challenges among the student body, within the special provision school. For these staff, HSB is occurring within the context of a range of risky and potentially harmful behaviours (including child sexual exploitation, substance misuse, 'self-tattooing', among others). Interviews with a group of four school nurses from one of the seven boroughs we work across stated that there was an evident need to address HSB as part of a catalogue of issues being faced at any one time. The DSL from School 11 explained that all students in the school are involved with some kind of service (for example, youth offending team, children's social care.)

### *Demands of safeguarding*

This multi-dimensional nature to students' needs and risks poses additional challenges for comprehensive safeguarding. This is highlighted within the interview with staff from School 11 but is an issue shared by many of the schools we worked with in year two. HSB itself is becoming more complex from the perspective of the staff members, for example as pertains to evolving forms of HSB online (for example, connected to nude image sharing for example, 'dick pics', 'catfishing') occurring alongside in-person assaults including of young men (for example, 'debagging' where students pull down the trousers and underwear of another young person).

**"...it can range over a broad perspective really, so, time spent in police custody and criminal activity, drug use and potential grooming situations, sexual activity, any kind of emotional abuse, neglect, unsafe risk taking... So, it really ranges across pretty much every need that you can think of. Piercing and tattoos is another big one that's come up and we're seeing more of." (School 11 teacher)**

**"...trying to educate them on online safety, and I know previously we've discussed catfishing with them and grooming online, and all sorts of images. We've talked about child sexual abuse and how that sort of comes from sharing and forwarding these images, so it is something that is constantly drip fed into all my lessons on the current theme. That cycles throughout the year. We always revisit because it is so common." (School 11 teacher)**

**"...we've had some girls in Year 8, even Year 7 talking about being sent, in their terminology, 'dick pics'...so receiving dick pics from Year 7." (School 11 teacher)**

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There are wider contextual challenges regarding funding, service provision and the multiple roles that schools and nurses are being asked to play and the issues they are having to deal with.

**"I think the expectation on schools at the minute is – I just - I don't, I don't know how to do what they do because a teacher is not just a teacher anymore are they? They're family support workers, social workers, first aiders, mental health workers, drug workers - you know that there's so much on teachers now." (School nurse)**

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Schools also have academic targets and standards, which may be challenging with different cohorts.

**"...there's a lot of children need a more practical side - they aren't cut out for sitting at desks all day. Lots of children have been abused and you know they've witnessed so much horrific stuff and how can they sit for 5 hours at a desk? It's just not going to happen, then teachers get frustrated because the targets aren't being met - they've got disruptive children in class - it's just, yeah, it just needs a huge overhaul." (School nurse)**

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Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there are additional challenges connected to student absence and disengagement from school, with schools not necessarily being a site where issues can be identified and responded to if students are not attending school.

The school nurses described how given the complex, multidimensional nature of young people's needs, the goal is to understand the nature of the issues that disproportionately affect different groups and to develop and implement evidence-based interventions that can, in turn, reduce "inequality" resulting from experiences of harm.

From their perspective, it is also about prevention of harm and promotion of health and wellbeing, insofar as there may be a distinction between promoting health and wellbeing (for example,



through awareness raising) and prevention of harm through addressing the barriers and facilitators to health and wellbeing. This kind of public health approach to tackling HSB seems to create scope not just for reduction of negative outcomes but also promotion of positive outcomes.

**“...you’re delivering that public health knowledge and awareness to raise the profile of these issues and identifying certain groups and individuals that are more at risk.”** (School nurse)

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Preventative work includes extending focus to those involved in enacting HSB through implementing measures to stop their behaviours before or once they have taken place:

**“... we have to be more proactive. This is looking at actually where do we need to put all the resources and it is about stopping it in the first place isn’t it, because actually I suppose we are kind of sticking plasters on it if we’re not dealing with the root of the problem aren’t we?”** (School nurse)

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So too does safeguarding in response to incidents.

**“...two children: one who’s the alleged perpetrator, one alleged victim. They’re both separate but word has got out and a lynch mob wanted to lynch this lad. We have to protect him - a parent rang up and it was credible information. So, we put safeguarding in place for that young person.”** (School 11 DSL)

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Supporting and enabling school staff and other partners to undertake preventative and responsive safeguarding effectively needs to address practical and emotional challenges entailed in safeguarding, including through institutional support and systematic supervision and through multi-agency partnership working that enables all staff involved to feel confident to act within their relevant competencies.

The interviews with the teacher and DSL found that safeguarding is managed through a formal process of logging and sharing incidents via a computerised system, with disclosures a constant feature of working in the school.

Everything is logged, even if seemingly small or irrelevant because it may be part of a bigger picture of risk and harm.

**“...even if we think it’s irrelevant, that tiny bit of information can slot into a bigger jigsaw puzzle and then all of a sudden, all the pieces click together and you can make out a picture...”** (School 11 teacher)

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As well as slowly gathering a picture, there is also the day-to-day pressure of responding to immediate crises:

**“We actually see these, these families, these young people actually at - it’s live. It’s crisis - so you do an attendance call. Then they can’t - and it’s all kicking off in the background. It’s, it’s crazy... we have to make these decisions very quickly - do I ring the police? Do I do this? Do I do that? And that intervention is vital. Very often they’re open to intervention when they’re in crisis, but not when everything settles down. And you do a referral, then they disengage. And that can happen several times before they do engage. So we are on the front line, I really think we are.”** (School 11 DSL)

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The teacher interviewed at School 11 indicated that relationship-based practice is vital for effective safeguarding but that developing and maintaining trust and rapport between staff and students can be challenging. For example, the teacher explained that staff can gain insight into the issues affecting students through informal interactions with students, whereby they open up and disclose because they feel safe with that staff member.

This includes through being responsive to students being “inquisitive” about “feeling unsafe” as well as making direct explicit “disclosures.”

The teacher felt that making notes at the time of a disclosure can be off-putting for students, who may not realise the significance of what they are saying. Staff then have to recall and record the information later, which can be challenging. This teacher also explained that responding to disclosures in-situ when there is a need for immediate safeguarding can be practically difficult, for example if there is not another staff member who can cover any class that the teacher is responsible for.

**“...you want to make sure you’ve got all the factual information correct, but you can’t just grab open a laptop or start scribbling, because that can put them off...so you’ve got to try and remember as best you can, all the information. It’s challenging, yeah, especially when you’ve got lessons back-to-back, and no breaks in the timetable where you’ve got time...”** (School 11 teacher)

As well as these practical challenges, the teacher felt that maintaining positive relationships with students requires transparency about safeguarding relationships, so that any action taken in response to disclosures does not damage trust. At the same time, there is also a risk that the relationship could be damaged if staff do not have the time to be responsive to students in the moment, which may make them feel “rejected.”

**“It can be quite difficult because they’ll open up to you but they don’t want you to do anything with it. They are happy for the school to know, but don’t want the parents to know. Or you could have multiple students outside your classroom wanting to talk to you because you’re their safe person, but you’ve got a lesson as well, a class full.**

**You’ve got maybe four students saying “I need to talk to you right now” and you’re like “I can’t talk to you” and then they feel rejected then they won’t open up again... it takes a long time to build that relationship and that trust... you know you do it for the right reasons and you have to do it, that’s your job, but you do worry that by reporting things sometimes you are going to break that relationship and that trust... you do feel conflicted, but you know you do it for the right reasons.”** (School 11 teacher)

When not requiring an immediate response, this teacher said that student disclosures can be used as teachable moments when made in the company of other students, including to facilitate further disclosures.

**“[student disclosures] can lead on to some interesting, sort of philosophical discussions actually, and important conversations... ‘if this does happen, what could you do?’ or ‘if you’re feeling a certain way, where could you turn?’ and they’re generally quite supportive of each other.”** (School 11 teacher)

Harnessing disclosures in this way requires a skilled approach to doing so that balances any need for safeguarding and, moreover, does not overly burden the young people.

**“...they are acting like a bit of a mentor to other students, which is quite nice, but sometimes they’re not always in the right place themselves to take on that responsibility so we would still log that as a concern and follow that up.”** (School 11 teacher)

The group of school nurses from one borough we work with spoke insightfully about relationship-based practice as underpinning safeguarding. The role of the school nurse was felt to offer confidentiality, credibility and trust but must be embedded over the longer-term. They were aware that listening and talking with students is as much of an intervention as formal action.

**“We’re independent at school so I think young people tend to feel a little bit more comfortable to come and have a chat and maybe they’d open up a little bit more sometimes, whereas they might not do it in school otherwise.”**

**“...you’re allocated your primary schools that tend to link through to the secondary school, so the idea being is you’ve gone in primary from reception doing work with them, they get to know you and we don’t really move teams massively - so when you’re out shopping and somebody will spot you and say hello, you get that relationship and because that relationship is there - you’re somebody that they feel that they can come and talk to, but that, I mean, it takes years to build but it’s important isn’t it?”**

**“I think sometimes it’s just nice to have that one person that you can rely on - it’s confidential and you can just talk and offload to.”**

**“...if they do have a problem, they know that they can come to you as you’re a nice person and that you do listen.”**

As well as practical challenges, the emotional toll of working in this setting and having to make difficult decisions and balancing acts was palpable from the School 11 interviews.

The DSL explained that aspects of practice were shaped not by protocol as such, but by their personal commitment to the role:

**“...also we’re at crisis point when we ring up [social services] in the morning, I’ll be ringing if I’ve reported the child missing, I’ll be ringing at 8 o’clock at night. Professionally, I’m not meant to because it goes onto the police but I think morally as a DSL, I think ‘is that child alright? Do I need to be doing this? Do I need to prepare, prepare for some things?’ And I do think we do go very much above and beyond. Because we want to.”**

**“All these children are all your responsibility as a DSL, we’ve got deputies, but DSL, if you’re in that role, you are going to oversee all that. The buck stops with you.” (School 11 DSL)**

There was indication of vicarious trauma and triggering of personal trauma connected to safeguarding. The teacher suggested that the emotional toll is impacted by the need to carry the young people’s disclosure and the pain they may be feeling:

**“...I think we all have our own experiences as well, and I know people can be dealing with their own trauma. That can also have a big impact on staff that are receiving those disclosures, because they’ve obviously got their own sort of previous jigsaw puzzle piece...that makes them them...and sometimes that can be quite triggering. Sometimes it can be very difficult.” (School 11 teacher)**

**“It can be quite distressing sometimes to see students when they’re disclosing things, things that they’ve been through, and we’re kind of... we passed that on and they now get the help... but we’re just left with that. Hearing those awful things, you can’t help but sometimes think and replay it almost, and there’s been times on a weekend where you think ‘gosh, is this person safe? what are they doing? And you all go home... and I’ll be in bed at night and get upset...and you do get tearful because you do build these relationships and these attachments.” (School 11 teacher)**

**“...you just hope that you’ve done enough. I hope I’ve done enough. Making sure I’ve done everything. Making sure that we’re following the policies, but it does lay heavy on your heart sometimes because you do get to know them and**

**to know they’ve experienced something awful, can be quite distressing. You try not to show that reaction because we try not to react so that they don’t feel judged in any way, and then afterwards it’s like [deep exhale] “ookkkaaaayyyy”...” (School 11 teacher)**

The DSL in this school recounted similar challenges of working with highly complex cases whereby the emotional impacts are significant.

Beyond specific safeguarding in response to incidents, there are also challenges in this setting responding to normalised cultural issues, for example, around attitudes to gender and sexuality. As well as the difficulties staff experience in tackling the underlying causes of these attitudes, there is strain on staff, as well as other students, in being exposed to harmful attitudes (for example, homophobic comments).

**“...what we’re seeing is that we can challenge the students quite often. Their belief system or their thought processes are ingrained from wider society issues... misogyny, homophobia and prejudice with LGBTQ, it’s entrenched within society and it’s knowing how to challenge that properly, knowing the right terms to say. Worries that you’re going to say the wrong thing or you say something that parents might not agree with necessarily...” (School 11 teacher)**

**“There’s quite a lot of homophobia. “It’s all weird”, “it’s not right”, “it’s not natural”, “it shouldn’t happen”, “lesbians are ok though.” These are my students! “Lesbians are okay”, because of what they are viewing online basically was the crux of it. They view lesbian porn and therefore lesbian porn is OK. Because they quite like to watch that. They watch porn. That’s another one, huge. But put two men, and “it’s absolutely wrong”, “it’s disgusting”, “it’s unnatural and shouldn’t happen”. “They should be set on fire, and locked up in prison, and locked in a cage and set on fire so that they couldn’t escape to make sure that they’re actually dying.” (School 11 teacher)**

**“...we have staff members who are gay, knowing how to tackle that quickly that takes a lot of...you choose your words very carefully, you don’t want to trigger anybody...but that can be quite difficult.” (School 11 teacher)**



### *Support for safeguarders*

The interview with the teacher suggested that short-term and group-based support offered via staff wellbeing initiatives is not fully effective. The teacher felt that some staff are reluctant to engage and that some kind of embedded supervision for staff is required to address the constant state of emotional pressure and pain that staff may be experiencing, in a responsive way for each individual.

**“...it seems to be the same staff that will take up those opportunities... I still think there’s that taboo about it, but actually, there is no shame in it. It’s just trying to break down those taboos, it’s those unwritten rules isn’t it? Trying to encourage people to access them and what I’ve found is that staff are not very responsive in a group setting...”**  
(School 11 teacher)

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The supervision needs to be embedded, flexible and tailored, otherwise the impacts are being absorbed by staff as part of the job.

**“...it’s just that, putting it all straight, so you are able to walk out of the door and leave it at work. I think that’s the hardest thing to learn to do, was that. Have we done everything we can do now? That switching off can be difficult to do...”**  
(School 11 teacher)

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This teacher felt that formal supervision, independent from the school and confidential, is needed because of concerns about appearing ‘weak’ and any openness about difficulties they are experiencing being potentially stigmatising.

**“...in a lot of ways, the staff are a lot like the students. They need to know the person, build that relationship and build that trust, before they open up, so it needs to be sort of visible in school. Not necessarily every day, not necessarily saying that person has to be on school premises, but just knowing the person that they can open up to really. Ideally, somebody that’s not managed within the school setting so that staff feel they’ve got the freedom to talk open and honestly... I think there’ll always be that wall of wariness, for want of a better phrase, because if they’re part of the school team, are they going to go and tell?”**

**I don't want to be seen as weak, that kind of thing, and so sessions that are available...not necessarily within school time, but there's somebody there that comes in." (School 11 teacher)**

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The support would need to be accessible on a consistent basis, accessible as needed:

**"...they've got that access there - and again it would have to be available all of the time for somebody because we never know when these disclosures are going to come, so you can't necessarily schedule in. Almost like a hotline almost, as well as sessions so they've got that person there..." (School 11 teacher)**

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It would also need to be responsive to the individual and the way they are comfortable to engage, depending on their personal circumstances:

**"...if you have someone who has really struggled, somebody who is sort of trauma-informed and can work therapeutically with staff and know when their boundaries have been reached and know when to signpost on to more specialist counselling provision. I think the hard bit is the time limit - some people might only need that one session, whilst some people might need that once a week, and some might need that for a year. I think one thing from working with these students is you know you can't just say "right, you can talk to me for six sessions and then that's it. you're off on your own!" They're not ready to and I think the flexibility needs to be there for that. That some staff might need a little longer." (School 11 teacher)**

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Essentially, without more structured support, it will just involve staff seeking support from senior staff, with those at the top not receiving any support.

**"...they [DSLs] are dealing with it in more detail than we are. I'm not aware that they really have enough supervision support for them dealing with it, especially as crises happen a lot in our setting - a lot of cases, and it is a big pressure and a big stress upon them too, and they'll say "oh, it's my job. I'm just doing my job" and they're doing a good job of doing their job, but they also need looking after because they're not invincible either and they need looking after too." (School 11 teacher)**

The lack of support is further exacerbated by a lack of training to deal with the complexities of HSB and associated attitudes. The response seems to depend on individual staff members and their skills and outlooks. Even when skilled, however, staff still require support and there was a sense from the interviews that schools are at the coalface of deeper social problems.

**"...you just go off your own moral compass, what you know is right and the only way I can describe it, it's like time slows down and you are making that split-second judgment in your head where you think...it's almost like a thought process... right I've heard this but I'm not going to react. What's the question going to be? I think I'm going to try to understand more here because this needs digging deeper as to why that thought process is there and can we unpick. But that's in an instant, so the only way to describe it is like time slowing down and you're making that snap decision in your head but the thought process that goes, is always why, tell me why?...And quite often then I'll go and get advice from SLT and go, "well this is what's been said, this is how I handled it, do I follow this up?" Does it need following up, or actually, if they express their opinion in a room that they thought was safe and that discussion was important because it was an important teaching point - it's the line of, do I report this? Or actually is it teaching? It's important for you to challenge, but where's that line? I think some staff would find that very intimidating and would be fearful of being in that situation because I think they may feel very careful of what they want to say, and rightfully so, because you don't want to offend or cause harm...and you do want to get it right. You don't want to sort of add to any misconceptions, but definitely some training on tackling those issues or even some guidance of what, how to challenge, how to have those difficult conversations with them I think would be beneficial." (School 11 teacher)**

**"...the minute the student steps out the door they are back into society with the same entrenched views and the same problems. And then the next day, we start again from day one so it needs to be...You hear all the time, "schools need to be teaching this"...and 100% I agree, but the responsibility can't always lie with schools.**

Something's got to be done in society because whether we want to admit it or see it, it's

**happening, and these students are out there and they are suffering. Something needs to be done in society to support these students, and some things need to be done in the wider community... Something needs to change and someone needs to help these students because these children are lost.” (School 11 teacher)**

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The DSL in this school recounted the impact personally of a lack of supervision.

**“I wasn’t really getting any supervision from the old head teacher. In fact, you were damned if you did and damned if you didn’t... That head teacher didn’t give me any supervision at all, so it almost became the norm to take all this on your shoulders. And time went on, he moved on, staffing changed, [current head teacher] came into the picture and wow, everything has changed from then. I became a professional person. I knew what was inside me and he allowed me to be the professional person I knew was always there... The old ethos of a support network suddenly went from nothing to everything. I did wonder thinking, wow, how much longer could I have carried on ‘cause I was thinking at the time before it changed, I can’t keep doing this. I just can’t keep doing this. This is just too much.”**

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For this DSL, it resulted in “burnout”.

**“I was in burnout - but also I didn’t realise supervision was out there. I was naive to it. I didn’t realise people had supervision...”**

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The DSL in this school described her experiences of being provided with external supervision, funded and supported by the school. The DSL was highly positive about external supervision and recommends it as a valuable way of working through the personal burdens entailed in safeguarding, identifying when and how they may be struggling with the role and responsibility, and to, overall, aid prevention through improving the quality of the work they do with students in the school. Also important for this DSL was senior support:

**“I know I’m trusted. I’m a valued member of senior management team and I’m a valued member of the staff. I feel genuinely respected by the people I work with.”**

For this DSL, supervision and senior support enabled them to rebuild their confidence and capabilities after a significantly stressful period under former management:

**“I wouldn’t be back here right now without them. I wouldn’t be on top of my game. I feel like I’m on top of my game again.”**

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It is the support and supervision that can enable confidence, given the fraught nature of decision-making.

**“I felt like ‘am I no good at my job if I’m going for some support here?’ You’re the DSL, you know, and you’re not giving me the confidence to go and make that decision on my own - but if I make this decision on my own am I wrong? And are you going to have a go at me for making that decision on my own, even though you’re not allowing me the time or supervision to discuss children, how I feel, children, families?’ So that’s why you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. That’s the only way I can actually explain it, my supervision.” (School 11 DSL)**

**“She’s [supervisor] always helped me cope with different things with my health, and the job to allow me to do the job, to be on top of my game, ‘cause you have to be within safeguarding. I don’t want to be 10 years down the line and something has gone terribly wrong. And they’re saying you haven’t safeguarded this child... And you have to be mentally able to do that. You cannot forget things, you know, it’s too important.” (School 11 DSL)**

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In this DSL’s experience, supervision is both practically and emotionally beneficial.

**“She gives me strategies, I give her a problem: ‘this is how I’m feeling’ - she explores a little bit because how I’m really feeling may not be clear. You know, and I may not understand what I’m feeling anyway. Why am I feeling like, you know, what’s going on with me? I’m a strong person, I come from Irish blood, you know? And so, it’s a bit of that, as well a bit of bravado. And then I’ll go – ‘I haven’t got a clue!’ and then she’ll say ‘this has triggered this’. And I’ll go ‘oh yeah.’ I need somebody independent to talk to me about this.**

To talk to me about all these problems at work, how carrying all those problems, you have to learn to be able to not just offload but to leave it behind a little bit.”

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External supervision is complementary to support within school – it offers a helpful specialist perspective.

**“Head teachers can’t take on everything within a school. And you know, they’re human and sometimes we do need to refer to the experts for that supervision, sometimes needs and expertise are different to the head’s skills. You can have the most sympathetic head in the world, like I have here, but he can’t give me those strategies that the external clinical supervisor did because she has that specialist qualification and the experience... sometimes staff are not verbally saying I need help ...so just explain what external supervision is. It’s not a bad thing. It’s not going to go against your career or anything like that.”** (School 11 DSL)



### *Partnership working for safeguarding*

The interview with the school nurses suggested that multiagency safeguarding based on partnership working can be beneficial in terms of combined expertise but that professionals are distinct in terms of their roles and competencies. The nurses suggested that while they may represent visible first line responders, it is not fully within their competency to intervene and being able to signpost to expert services and have informal conversations about emerging issues is valuable. The nurses felt that they do not have to be fully knowledgeable or responsible but have to know where they can go for advice and to refer or signpost to. This includes with respect to prevention and working with those displaying HSB.

**“I know there’s not much out there for this type of support and I know we get referrals [for HSB]. In my old job it was one of those ones where we were never quite sure what to do next, what is out there... who I could turn to...even if it was just an e-mail or a phone call... ‘this is a scenario, what would you suggest?’ because obviously we have acknowledged that this isn’t our expertise. We couldn’t then do that intervention as such, but at least now we know there is something out there.”**

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They wanted to feel trained and knowledgeable about what they can do and where to seek further support.

**“...specialist training because that’s where you get your knowledge from, that specialised training and then I think once you’ve had your training you feel “right, I know what I need to do” and obviously you’ve got the support then so whoever provided your training, you can get in touch and say “can you give me some advice, I’m not sure quite what to do here” so after today we would phone you or one of the team and ask for advice.”**

**“I wouldn’t feel we have the expertise to deliver an intervention, but I feel more confident that I know where to turn to for that support. Which is the key, because we sometimes will speak amongst ourselves to the team – “does someone know who does support for that?” and it’s nice to know that there is something out there that you at least could signpost us to, because it’s a knowledge of our limitations - this isn’t our expertise but at least now I can go actually I do know somewhere that could offer some support.”** (School nurses)

The DSL also highlighted a lack of specific training but that the offer from them is the day-to-day engagement with the child.

**“...this role as a DSL - you’re not trained to be a social worker but you are almost expected to take on a social worker role. We’re not trained. We’re not. We don’t do three years in university. We do one day Level 3 safeguarding. But I do think that the DSLs have that valuable experience of seeing those children day in, day out.”**

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It is the first-line response nature of the work, amidst staff turnover in other services.

**“I can work with the police and with some social workers. Some come and go so quickly I can’t, I can’t keep up with that social worker - when they change social workers things get missed, things get lost in a way and how can you fully support that family when they don’t trust anybody? They’re not going to disclose anything.” (School 11 DSL)**

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The ability to access and work with expert services is also valuable because it offers legitimacy in a context of risk aversion and a lack of confidence among professionals.

**“...it is word of mouth isn’t it and professionals talking to professionals, so it’s getting it out there and getting that support for young people and I do think people are a little bit scared when it comes to sexual abuse too - are they doing the right thing and are they doing the wrong thing?” (School nurse)**

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Yet, it is important to be critically mindful of this context. There was insight from the interviews with school nurses that they are being called upon to address health-related matters connected to “exploitation and risk” but that they have not been trained in “child sexual exploitation” specifically. It was in this context that they were operating as first-line responders, referring to trained experts as needed.

Multiagency working can, therefore, help ameliorate the challenges connected to limited time and resource to be fully trained in all areas and instead to work within the bounds of professional competence.

**“...it’s [building relationships] not even just with the children, it’s with the staff, getting to know who you need to speak to for certain things.”**

**“...it is working collaboratively, so we deliver the healthy child programme working with the school, parent, and the young people. A lot of our job is signposting when we know that we cannot deliver that intervention.” (School nurses)**

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The DSL felt similarly regarding the different roles and expertise.

**“...if it’s a child in social care, it’s social care, really we’re there to support social care, I haven’t got the expertise to lead on or host a child protection conference - I haven’t got that expertise. My expertise is seeing that lived experience of the child in school, sharing it with experts and passing it on.”**

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Safeguarding partners need the time and resources to build multiagency relationships over the long-term, with the nurses valuing the fact that they are embedded in schools and can spend time with other services learning about the work they do.

**“...where I’m at at the moment, I’m based in the school, so when I’m there I do kind of feel like I’m employed by the school - you know you go in, and you speak to the staff and on the break times you’ll have a chit chat about your day as you would with your actual colleagues.”**

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Relationship-based practice between services is important and can support effective practice with young people based on the respective, but complementary expertise.

**“...we’re independent at school so I think young people tend to feel a little bit more comfortable to come and have a chat and maybe they’d open up a little bit more sometimes, whereas they might not do it in school otherwise.”**

The DSL made similar points regarding working with police – they like working with their Police Community Support Officers because they know the nature of the school and can “blend in” when responding to incidents rather than creating more problems. They said: “It’s a strong partnership and

it's been built over time and it's still being built over time."

These points were echoed by the School 11 teacher who felt that schools need support from wider society, particularly after they leave school.

**"We need children's centres back up to help with parenting. We need mentors. We need to break down misconceptions... we need some champions like that out there. We need someone to give them a shot and not see the label, see the person. See all the magical, amazing things that they've got to offer rather than a label. They need a champion. That's what they need. We need champions out there, looking after them. Schools, that school service that nurtures them and is perhaps for some of them, been their only safe space. Something needs to bridge the gap, where they've got mentorships. I don't know what that would look like or how it would need to go, but those champions need to still be there. The support can't just go."**

There also needs to be national political leadership in recognition of the centrality of safeguarding to learning.

**"We don't just come to school, not work school holidays and do the 9 till 3. We take this work home with us. We are DSL's – it's taking on a whole new role in school. What's allowing these children to learn is if we effectively deal with safeguarding, we're allowing these children to learn. And it's all linked altogether - to address safeguarding we have to address attendance, which is linked to learning, which ultimately the government wants children to learn... but we're human... DSLs are human. Without a social worker qualification, but taking on a lot of that responsibility. And I think DSL's save a lot of problems further down the line in society with the impact – so it's a bigger picture isn't it." (School 11 DSL)**

This perspective was somewhat specific to the special provision perspective.

**"...our description is a short stay school. The reality of that is different and we still support our students as we've got students that have left that come back and still talk to staff that they know they're still there, but they need that emotional coaching through life. I love them and I'm**

**passionate about them and I want people to see them for the wonderful people they are, not that they've been kicked out of school because actually, they've been failed, and to just chuck them out and leave them...it's not fair on them. It's not fair." (School 11 teacher)**

But the DSL feels that issues may be different but still present in mainstream.

**"it's a really tough job, all those DSL's out there - whether it's mainstream or PRU [Pupil Referral Unit]. With a PRU it's very, very - it's condensed. I hear everything. In mainstream, it's got its difficulties because there's a lot more freedom - so they might not get to hear as much as me. Our young people come with a lot of safeguarding already behind them. It's just the way it is with their vulnerability - within mainstream there's other difficulties."**

In summary, these insights demonstrate the need to:

- provide sufficient time, training and support to DSLs to fulfil their role
- develop the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB
- maximise multi-agency safeguarding relationships using relationship-based practice

## RSHE content and pedagogy: 'Real Respect' Programme (School 13)

School 13 is a voluntary sector organisation providing alternative education programmes for students at risk of school exclusion. Its staff team consists of mentors and youth workers who are commissioned by primary and secondary schools to provide individual mentoring and group work programmes to students.

For the past three years, Home Office 'Safer Streets' funding has been used to develop and deliver a targeted intervention called the 'Real Respect' programme. Real Respect is an educational intervention for young people identified as involved in or at risk of being involved in HSB. It has been delivered in several schools by School 13's specialist facilitators who go into schools as external providers of the targeted programme.

Student and school staff feedback is collected by programme facilitators using pre and post-programme surveys as part of the routine evaluation of the programme for its funders. This feedback suggested that the programme may contain areas of promising practice which could be usefully replicated in other schools.

School 13 allowed us to evaluate the content and delivery of the programme via:

- interviews with two of its three programme facilitators
- content analysis of session plans
- a review of three bi-annual evaluation reports, written by the charity's service manager for the programme's funders

Our main research questions aimed to identify the extent to which and how the programme could be developed into a universal preventative educational intervention. School 13's engagement plan was specifically focused on this aim, in light of concerns about how best to engage with young people about their perspectives and experiences of HSB in ways that bridge gaps between adult and youth understandings of the problem.

## Programme content

At primary school level, the programme consists of group education sessions which span a six-week course.

1. Introductions, expectations and group agreement.
2. Qualities of healthy friendships, consequences of choices, definition of and importance of boundaries, and recognising and responding to discomfort in situations (protective behaviours).
3. Offensive language, what to do if someone makes you feel uncomfortable (sexual harassment) and the law on this; definition of consent and how to communicate consent (grooming, coercion and sexual harassment).
4. Laws and boundaries around physical touch, responding to unwanted touching, and consent.
5. Laws and boundaries around harmful sexual content online, what to do if see the content and understanding/communicating consent.
6. Identifying a support network, how to report abuse, who to talk to, learning review.

Facilitators explained that at the primary level, the programme is a general introduction to the concepts, addressing issues like consent and boundaries in general with an emphasis on what to do if feeling uncomfortable or unsafe. Instead of using sexual harassment examples, facilitators will choose different examples to convey the principles.

**"There's a strong emphasis in the primary work around personal boundaries and helping young people to be able to recognise if they're uncomfortable and what to do in that situation, like finding their voice, using their 'no', having that 'no' respected and respecting other people's 'no'. So, we probably use different language than what we would use in high school but we're still introducing the concept of things like consent."**

At secondary school level, the course lasts for eight weeks.

1. Introductions, context, group rules and safeguarding responsibilities.
2. Definitions and how to show respect, within the context of human rights.

3. Understanding culture and its effects and development, as well as terminology and law around sex.
4. Definition and importance of personal boundaries, identifying boundaries and healthy relationships.
5. Where and how we learn about sex and relationships and meaning of the emotional side of sex and love, impacts of pornography.
6. Communication around sex and consent and meaning and practice of consent.
7. Using our voice to call out and report and sources of good quality sex and relationships information and support and advice.
8. Reflection and areas of change identified; feedback.

### *Programme philosophy and facilitation*

Programme facilitators explained that the programme has several intersecting aims. The first aim related to addressing both the enactment and experience of harm, rather than just focusing on those experiencing or at risk of experiencing harm. In other words, how to prevent or address the enactment of harm, not just how victims or potential victims can better protect themselves or avoid harm. The approach is anti-victim blaming in nature.

**“...we work with victims - boys and girls - and there was a lot of focus on ‘let’s work with these young people, build up their confidence so they’re not vulnerable to the exploitation’ and the thing for me was always ‘well, where’s the work on the other side of it? Where’s the work with potential people that are maybe perpetrating those situations, where are we looking at why they feel it’s okay to treat another human being in that way or to take advantage of somebody or to manipulate somebody?’ It’s got to be a more of a two pronged... [for example] when someone isn’t giving consent, how are we reacting to that?”**  
(Programme facilitator)

Further aims included:

- to create open dialogue with young people about issues around respect, consent, and so forth, and to explore the nuance of such topics
- to incorporate ‘respect’ as terminology that young people can recognise and engage with, understanding the concept for themselves

**“...so many of our young people will talk about respect and ‘oh, I’ve been disrespected’ and it’s like young people so often saying they want people to respect them, but yet for them to give respect, other people have to earn their respect. And it’s like, well let’s actually break it down and look at it. That word is bandied around so much, but what is real respect? What does respect for another human being actually look like? And let’s break it down for young people.”** (Programme facilitator)



Facilitators described endeavouring to create conditions through the programme whereby:

- topics and issues are considered from different perspectives
- young people hear different ideas and perspectives and reflect upon their personal perspectives as a group through hearing from others
- young people's cultural reference points are used to guide and develop discussions and the learning is situated within their realities and peer contexts
- facilitators actively engage in discussions and share experiences while facilitating active and participatory learning

The Real Respect programme is delivered by highly skilled facilitators and involves group sessions and one-to-one mentoring. School 13 was responsible for deciding which students to refer to which format.

Facilitators explained that one-to-one mentoring can be better for those who struggle with a group setting while those attending the group need to all be "on the same level." As outlined below, facilitators explained that group discussions can be valuable for young people in terms of hearing and learning from diverse perspectives, but it requires the young person to feel able and willing to engage, while one-to-one can be more tailored and responsive to the individual.

**"...a lot of the one to ones tend to be people that might not do well in a group environment, like mixed ability or understanding... I think the beauty of the group is the group discussions, is that they can hear us, like we share our opinions, the kids share their opinions, and they hear their peers... they can really get into some good debates and really challenge them. And you can do that in a one-to-one session but it's only the two of you. But then there are some people that don't do well in the group, or they feel embarrassed talking about certain things, so that works well in a one-to-one because it is just the two of you and you can really kind of hone in on them and ask 'why do you think like that and where has that come from, let's look back and think about that and really unpack it?' That is the beauty of doing the one-to-one work as well." (programme facilitator)**

The facilitators described how enabling these peer-to-peer discussions involved balancing the nature of how young people may want to interact (for example, potentially with humour) with a safe and appropriate approach based on perspective taking and mutual respect:

**"I think it's just really good for them to hear the opinions of each of them but in that setting where it's trusted. There's always somebody saying something that somebody else doesn't see from that perspective or disagrees with, or that we can challenge – they challenge each other. They ask each other why they think that, or they'll sometimes take the mickey out of each other a little bit but then we'll have a spin on it to try and encourage them to see that perspective at least and to respect one another's differences." (Programme facilitator)**

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Currently, delivery of this programme is limited by the small number of specialist facilitators employed by School 13, with there being scope to potentially upskill further facilitators if there is sufficient demand and resource in the future. Facilitators expressed concern that the targeted nature of the programme may create stigma and a reluctance to refer (because young people have to be identified as 'at risk'), hence the interest in shifting to a universal programme.

The facilitators explained that they came to specialise in delivering the programme organically via their previous expertise in working with children who were criminally and sexually exploited and also with personal experiences of harm (for example, grooming, rape) that help them understand the dangers and realities faced by young people. They believe that young people find it credible and legitimate to engage with facilitators who have experience and knowledge and, in turn, are more comfortable to open up, ask questions, and learn from facilitators.

**"...one thing that they said is that it is so much better to hear it from somebody that's gone through something, because we're not just hearing it from somebody else that's not experienced it, because it doesn't mean anything. Whereas, when you are able to share your personal experiences with them - they sort of, they would be more in tune, they want to listen because they're interested, they're intrigued, they'll ask**

**questions and they felt comfortable to be able to ask questions because who else, who else are they going to find that from if they can't speak to people that have been through those things?"**

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The facilitators also felt that the combination of a male and female facilitator in the group sessions can be valuable in terms of responding to the dynamics and energy of the group and ensuring some flexibility of engagement for the young people. From their experience, boys, in particular, can vary in terms of their readiness and willingness to engage with a female facilitator.

**"Some boys have really struggled with the fact that I'm female and talking about some of the stuff that we talk about, they've found uncomfortable. And other boys have been really open with me about it, and I guess valued having a female's opinion I think, whereas I've been like actually 'no, this is how it might come across to a female' and they're like 'oh?' and they're open to it. Whereas some boys from the offset have been just like 'no, this is really awkward, I don't want to talk about it.'"**

**"Especially when the lads would sort of, get a bit more heightened, or bit more energetic or a bit too over-enthusiastic about certain things, it's where they would normally respond better to the male sort of calming them down or giving them an instruction."**

**"I felt very strongly when we first started delivering that it needed to be a male and a female, because I think that, what we found is like, in all boy groups - me saying stuff like 'actually, that's not respectful' - they're just gonna say 'that's because you're a woman' but actually hearing it from a guy saying 'actually, it's not okay to treat women like that, or it's not okay to treat someone else' - they kind of seem to take it more on board from another guy. Or hearing both perspectives, so they really benefit from having both views."**

From the perspective of facilitators, the following skill set is vital.

- Openness.
- Unembarrassed.
- Capable of dealing with students pushing boundaries.
- Knowledgeable.
- Capable of safeguarding.
- Responsive to students' knowledge and perspectives.
- Able to balance serious and light-hearted discussion.
- Interested in the young people.
- Non-shaming.
- Convey respect and active listening, flexibility.
- Capable of creating a safe space within the school environment (non-authoritarian).

As outlined below, group rules are set and followed from the outset, which facilitators felt can help in centring the approach and managing the dynamics of the group. They described making clear efforts to distinguish themselves from the wider school staff body and to convey confidentiality but with expectations regarding students more generally adhering to school rules beyond the group and with transparency about safeguarding requirements. They explained that it is important to be authentic and credible and not try to be someone they are not because young people will identify that and may disengage. Authenticity is also important in terms of genuinely being interested in what the young people think and willingness to be youth-led.

**"...the kids pick up on that vibe, and they are very much real to us. Because I think working with kids in all settings, they just know straight away if you're not and they'll just call you out on it! So, I think you very much get to a stage where we go in trying to be as authentic as we can, speaking about our own personal experiences, we speak about why we're there and I think we try and give them value."**

**"Because a lot of the rules say things like - what goes on in the room, stays in the room - and they want it to be confidential... but we do remind them about safeguarding, and if anybody said or did anything that would be harmful - we remind them that we have to then tell school, because school are the people that would obviously would keep them safe while they're there. But... we do say to them 'we really need you to go back out**

**and follow the school rules again, because if not we wouldn't be able to return, or you wouldn't be able to continue because you're not following your school rules out there' so it's a reminder and they do sort of see the difference."**

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Within this context, there is the possibility of students wanting to "test" the facilitators and "push boundaries" to verify whether the facilitators will react in the same way as teachers would do. Facilitators have to navigate these tests and convey themselves differently. The skill set to do so requires experience but also depends on the personality of the facilitator. Facilitators cannot take things that the students say or do personally. They have to be open to the conversations and remain committed to the objective of creating a safe space for open dialogue, with compassion for what may be going on for young people. Joint problem-solving approaches to complex issues is also important.

**"...they want to see if they can push the boundaries, so in those first couple of sessions you just kind get bombarded with the rudest words, the rudest 'deh de deh'. You've got to be able to roll with that... we do group rules, so it's not just group rules... we set that together, and we say 'this is a safe space and you can say whatever you want in here.'"**

**"...there's a time for being light-hearted... but a time to be able to draw them into some serious conversations too, and I think a lot of the feedback – the main things that they said themselves were – 'I felt listened to, I felt respected, and I didn't feel I was being judged.'"**

**"...when we see some of the boys, some people might be put off – when they're saying all the rude stuff. Some people are put off by that. But it's actually just being able to see past those behaviours and have the end goal of what we're trying to do and what we're trying to accomplish... so let's just sit and hash it out together and try and figure it all out."**

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From the perspective of facilitators, there can be a role for teachers in these kinds of programmes, but it will be those teachers that are approachable and that give an impression of mutual respect who will

be most effective. In other words, they need to be able to relate to children and build trust. They also need to genuinely endorse and have passion for the subject they are teaching, because young people will be able to identify if the teacher does not really buy into it or think it is valuable. Teachers need to role model the messages they are conveying around topics like respect and to unpack and deconstruct behaviour that may be disrespectful rather than just administer punishments or consequences. Incidents can be used as 'teachable moments' but doing so effectively requires having built rapport so that disruptive behaviour or student disengagement because of feelings of discomfort can be managed.

**"...we go in and we're like 'actually guys, we're doing this because we want you to have good, healthy, safe relationships – and like, we care about the fact that you're never gonna feel vulnerable or exploited by anyone, and that you're gonna go on and you're gonna respect people and people are going to respect you.' We want that for them, genuinely want that for them – it's why we're in this job... it's getting to recognise when they are not comfortable, their space boundaries, and they can say 'no'...recognise that feeling and put a word to it. I think that message is very powerful for them because they can use their voice now, moving forward, so I think it's that confidence of knowing that their voices matter. Their voice is powerful. I think even being told in a group setting that we want to hear their voice means something – they know they have a voice and they can use it so I think that builds their confidence. And I think for young people to truly understand what a healthy relationship really looks like can be absolutely life-changing...life-saving in some circumstances."**

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As part of the youth-led approach, facilitators were mindful of being age appropriate. They felt that the content can be delivered at any age, but the nature of the discussion can be managed and adjusted in terms of how the topics are explored and the messages conveyed. In these regards, the programme is youth-led and responsive to young people's existing knowledge, perspectives and orientations to the topics. Hence, it is helpful for young people participating in groups to be on a similar level. The facilitators believe that it is challenging to achieve this within larger groups, including the more standard 30-person class sizes in schools. Even groups with lots of friends can be

challenging because they can engage in extensive conversation with one another. For facilitators, it is important to identify and work with group dynamics before commencing the programme.

**“...having a student-led group means going with whatever they bring. Every group I’ve done has been different because of what they bring... you’ve got to be able to think on your feet really, when you deliver it, because something could come up that you’ve not had come up before, or you’ve not had that approach. So, it’s about adapting there and then.”**

### Strengths and areas for development

We examined three bi-annual evaluations of the programme which were prepared by School 13’s service managers for funders. These in-depth evaluations analysed participant feedback which was collected via pre-and post-programme participant surveys. The survey asked participants to self-assess their understanding of the following concepts:

- I can explain what respect is
- I can explain why some comments may be harmful to me or others
- I understand what my personal boundaries are
- I understand when I am allowed to touch people and when its ok for them to touch me
- I understand that looking at or sharing some images may be harmful to me or others

The data gathered from these pre- and post-programme surveys was compared and analysed by service managers as a measure of programme impact.

Dr Emily Setty also scrutinised session plans in a comparative content review against other similar programmes. This analysis indicates that the programme aligns with best practice in terms of the youth-led, ecological systems approach to addressing the topics. The physical, active and creative teaching and learning is effective, with the programme displaying a commitment to equality and diversity and a non-shaming approach.

The impact metrics indicate some improvement in emotional wellbeing and positive change in various domains of life (for example, education and learning, relationships and support networks, confidence, behaviour/self-expression) among programme participants but also identification of ongoing, emerging or entrenching needs such as emotional wellbeing concerns, which relate to circumstances beyond the scope of what the programme addresses. The mentoring was well regarded by participants, with evidence that they felt listened to and safe and that it was a positive experience. For those with ongoing or emerging needs requiring further support, there may be a requirement for tailored interventions and referrals post-programme.

The self-report nature of some of the metrics meant that some findings regarding impact were somewhat limited due to high initial self-scoring (i.e., potential over-estimation of initial competences and performance). It was noted by the independent evaluation team that further evaluation requires more simple evaluation forms that directly link outcomes to project objectives in order to better evidence impact. There was also concern about the potential impact of peer pressure on survey completion in a group setting and that opportunities are required for individual completion.

Overall, the evaluations identified that the following are imperative to programme success:

- group respect
- open and safe spaces
- interactive, youth-led discussion
- incorporation of factual information to fill knowledge gaps and correct misunderstandings (knowledge check-ins are helpful in these regards).

It was also identified that it is important for young people to participate from the outset of the programme as far as possible and that time required to address behavioural issues in the group need to be factored in to programme planning.

Programme strengths and areas for improvement are outlined below.

Strengths at the primary school level:

- Successive stages of learning, whereby there is introductory content that prepares students before addressing substantive content in logical stages.
- Rights-based approach, regarding legal rights around consent and unwanted touching.
- Skills-based learning, regarding communicating consent.
- Emotional literacy and self-awareness, regarding identifying and acting upon feelings of discomfort.
- Responsibilities toward others, regarding choices and language.

The primary programme is also promising in that it offers opportunities for role-modelling and practising important skills, for example, 'respect for others' is embedded in the programme philosophy and the style of teaching and learning. It is student-led insofar as students actively contribute to the learning, for example, regarding what they deem inappropriate or unsafe and through having opportunities for personal reflection, for example, identifying personal boundaries.

**"...we practice what we're preaching, so we're doing the ground rules - like we say 'it's not just you guys, I'm following these rules as well, so it's what you expect of me. And when we're saying we're being respectful, I will be just as respectful to you guys.' And it's all of us, we're all agreeing to this and - but I think as well, it's treating them like we're on the same level - and we're on a level when we're having conversations. It's not me talking down to you or saying 'do this, do that', it's like more 'okay, well this might have happened to me one time, or this happened to a friend', then like, we're talking as people, yeah. ... we're expecting them to share their experiences and their thoughts, when we do the same, they can sort of see it's okay, they're not just asking me to do all of this."**

Wider evidence suggests that some areas could be developed or made more explicit.

- Broadening the framing of 'online content' from one of risk and harm to encompass more positive aspects.

- Broadening the framing of rights and responsibilities beyond legal constructs, to encompass the conditions in which rights and responsibilities are enacted, upheld and advocated for (or not, as the case may be).
- Examining the barriers and facilitators to acting upon factual knowledge, for example about healthy relationships, the law and consent.
- Addressing barriers to reporting and disclosures.
- Further emphasis on obligations toward others, for example, creating safety for others including regarding consent.

Overall, there may be scope to incorporate a more positive framing of healthy relationships, including not just what to do and how to report, but also looking at the conditions required for positive and healthy interactions. There seems to be some emphasis on being a 'good friend', which is promising, with the idea of positive relationships perhaps needing to be further embedded across consent, online content, and so forth.

At the secondary level, similar points apply regarding strengths and areas for improvement. Strengths include:

- Comprehensive content coverage and incorporation of contemporary examples in teaching and learning.
- Emphasis on the positive dimensions to relationships and the role of communication and consent within this context.
- Upholding rights to comprehensive and factual information.
- Addressing the ecosystem of learning and development around sex and relationships.
- Student participation and personal reflection regarding the implications of the topics for example, personal boundaries.
- Both pros and cons of pornography are discussed, suggesting a comprehensive and non-judgmental approach.
- Skills-based content regarding consent; and,
- Signposting to support and advice.

As with the primary school programme, there is a need to further consider how to address the barriers and facilitators to acting upon knowledge. While the pros and cons of pornography are addressed, there is then emphasis on harm and the law which may reinforce a solely negative framing. To achieve a more ecological or literacy-based approach, information on the law, while in accordance with statutory guidelines and a rights-based approach, may need to be coupled with further emphasis on the limitations of the law to fully guide and arbitrate over sex and relationships and, moreover, exploration of positive and healthy interactions.

### **Future development and application of a universal prevention programme: facilitator perspectives**

Informal feedback and the impression gained from young people participating in the secondary programme has led facilitators to feel that it would be beneficial for all young people to engage with the programme. Different young people may take different things from the programme but there is the potential for a positive impact for all.

**“...there’s something in it for every young person—something every young person could take something from... there’s something in there that I think every person will come away and think, yeah, that made sense.”**

However, facilitators identified the following issues as needing to be examined and addressed as part of any further development and application of the programme.

#### ***Class size***

A typically 30-student size class for RSHE may not elicit the same type of engagement and interaction that the facilitators have achieved with Real Respect as currently conceived. Student-led discussions and gauging where the room is at in terms of knowledge and experience is easier for facilitators to do in a smaller class size, while more variability is likely in larger groups. Young people seem to feel more comfortable contributing in a smaller group, as far as facilitators have gleaned. There may, however, be the potential for sessions to be delivered to larger groups with breakout approaches used for smaller group engagement and interaction.

### ***Group composition***

Based on a group size of eight, there could be a mixed group, ideally of a similar age, maturity and ability (or, as above, ‘on the same page’). Mixed gender groups can help with hearing different perspectives, but mixed age groups may not work as well. Friendship groups can be helpful for pre-existing ease and comfort in the group, which can save time because rapport between students does not need to be built from scratch. There can be issues that emerge in groups over the programme that can hamper engagement and the dynamics, which can be somewhat easier to address in friendship groups as it can be discussed. The school has a role to play in terms of their knowledge of the students, who can get referred and the potential group dynamics. It is important that facilitators and schools work together to ensure that the group composition is safe and that participants are on the same page.

### ***External facilitation***

Facilitators see a clear need for external facilitators, with difficulties arising potentially from having teachers delivering the programme and establishing the same rapport and dialogue. Young people seem to engage well with people outside of the school environment; students report that it feels more confidential when the facilitators do not know them or have any prejudgments or preconceptions. The facilitators are also comfortable with the topics and have chosen to do this work, which improves their credibility and ability to ‘break down barriers’ and share personal stories and experiences.

Teachers may be able to deliver the factual content, but the quality of the group discussion element may be lacking dependent on the teacher. Facilitators are responsive to what comes up in the room or what may be going on in the world at the time and can be flexible, which is also vital for engaging and relatable education. This approach requires flexibility and not always strictly adhering to session plans. The skill for facilitation is related to “thinking on your feet” and being responsive. It may be easier for external facilitators because they do not need to worry as much about any targets or objectives that teachers may be responsive to.

**“I think they need to feel free to say what they want to say, going forward, because that’s when they let their guard down and they almost**

forget that they're with a teacher. That's when all the things come out that we need have some discussion around that you get, you know, the golden nuggets from them then, when they know that you're not teacher."

"...it's just part of that feeling that it's private and I suppose we haven't got any pre-judgments - we don't already know. I think they would possibly still be the same with that member of staff if they really trusted them, but I wouldn't like to generalise it for all schools. It would be particular schools that have got real strength in numbers in that type of member of staff"

### Space

The space should be small and not too intimidating and flexible for moving around and doing activities. It should also be and feel private.

### Timing

Facilitators identified that as a universal programme, it would ideally start in primary school as a form of early prevention and then at secondary school, "dealing with the issues in the here and now." In other words, laying the groundwork at Years 5 and 6 and then revisiting and addressing emerging and current issues at Year 9, Year 12, and so on. With older young people, facilitators can start to explore the emotional side of their engagements with and experiences of relationships, whereby experiences are relatively more "real" at this stage. The need to enact and manage boundaries in their relationships in turn becomes more applicable and relevant to them in their lives at this stage.

"...the Year 9s and above definitely give more to the session, they've grown in confidence a bit more, but I do think it's important because for some of them it might have been a little bit late - by then a lot of them have done things like sent photos or forwarded images, so it depends on whether you're looking at whether we're going to manage this and how you're gonna not do these things, or let's prevent you from doing these things in the first place - so for me, it's always best to aim for prevention first."

"...more around like relational stuff, probably more around like the emotional side of stuff as well. We talk about the emotional side of sex and relationships and they look at you very blankly,

like, 'what, there are emotions involved in this?'"  
 "...it's okay talking about the boundaries in Year 9 and Year 6 but they're not really necessarily applying them or being in real situations where their boundaries are being tested. Whereas I think when they get to Year 12, they're finding that they are really needing to have to learn to stick to their own boundaries."

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Education around STIs, consent, pregnancy and other topics depends on the knowledge and experience in the group and the provision they have had already. Facilitators have found that they sometimes have to "myth bust" and are ready and willing to signpost to other services and sources of information and advice. In general, the facilitators feel it is imperative to identify where young people are getting their ideas and information about sex and relationships from, and how to ensure they are getting what they need from accurate and reliable sources.

"I've had some groups that have been really well-versed in it all, I know schools do a lot of that work, but then I've had other groups and it's been shocking what they don't know. We've had to be like 'okay, we need to break this down a little bit! So, I think if it comes up, then I'm addressing it - making sure they've got facts and not myths and know where to go for help. At the end of whichever session we always do signpost to make sure that they know where to go, where to access this website, or where to go to talk to someone if you want to find out some information."

"...we do ask them about where their sex education actually comes from. We more want to know that the information they are getting is accurate, facts and not myths, and reliable resources."

### Conclusions and areas for consideration

Overall, there are several examples of good practice as well as areas for consideration and for development.

The facilitator approach and orientation and programme philosophy align with the evidence base on good practice regarding:

- Facilitator style (open, non-judgmental, responsive, unembarrassed, willing to engage in

reciprocity and disclose personal experiences and perspectives).

- Avoidance of zero tolerance/punishment and instead, 'calling people in' and utilising teachable moments.
- Youth-led discussion but responsibly, constructively and safely managed.
- Distinct from teacher/school context but transparent about obligations and expectations.
- Capable and willing to change course and respond to student perspectives and contributions.
- Balancing information/facts with critical discussion and reflection.

The 'where young people learn about sex and relationships' emphasis is a fruitful way of taking a holistic and responsive approach. The process of role modelling and engaging in discussion and perspective taking is promising in terms of the process itself being an opportunity for skill development.

### ***Areas for consideration***

There is seemingly some emphasis on how to keep oneself safe and to recognise boundaries being crossed within the programme content. There is scope to further expand this emphasis to include obligations to others and to further explore the skills and emotional literacy in these regards, for example, why a person may overstep another's boundaries (knowingly or unknowingly). Consideration should also be given to how the law around nudes and pornography is dealt with, given the facilitator commitment to non-judgmental approaches. For example, are the various outcome codes available to police, designed to avoid the criminalisation of young people involved in consensual nude image sharing with similarly aged peers, explained in order to reduce barriers to reporting and destigmatise image sharing for young people? Finally, it would be valuable to expand any focus on the well-documented 'knowledge-practice' gap in RSHE and how the facilitators and barriers to acting upon knowledge can be addressed within a universal programme.

### ***Potential areas for development***

Notwithstanding the concerns of the facilitators and the evidence on what works with the programme as currently conceived, there is scope to consider the extent to which and how to expand to larger group sizes; teacher training for expansion of the approach internally within schools without the requirement for external facilitation; addressing gender dynamics in mixed settings successfully (seems to potentially work in the Real Respect programme but requires skilled facilitation); and specifically incorporating programme aims regarding, for example, the scope of the law to guide behaviour and the barriers and facilitators to transferring knowledge to practice.

As noted by facilitators, it is important to address socio-affective skills specifically, including the emotional sides of relationships. Programme aims and content could explicitly address the differences between cognitive critical thinking and awareness, the potentially ongoing social, cultural and affective dimensions, and dynamics that may continue to impact behaviour. Programme aims may, furthermore, need to better convey the balance of protection and participation rights seemingly of interest to the facilitators in terms of addressing risk and harm but through a clear and consistent message of positive and healthy relationships.

Finally, with any development of the programme into a universal programme, it will be important to be mindful of any unique individual needs that may require addressing via more tailored approaches. Universal programme planning should, therefore, include provision for identifying students with additional needs.

In summary, these insights demonstrate:

- the need to move towards a 'tools not rules' approach where students are given the opportunity to practice skills and apply their learning to their own lives
- the potential to use principles from the 'Real Respect' programme as an example of 'the what' and 'the how' of effective RSHE
- the value of external providers



## Helping parents and carers to support their children at School 20

Initially, the intention with this initiative was to bring together school and community stakeholders to address student safety feelings and perceptions in the context of concerns and awareness about safety within the community. It was driven by an ecological approach to centring the school within the community, with the aim of identifying how the school can contribute to creating safety within the community.

**“...we noticed that there was a strong sense of feeling unsafe within our local community and our children were feeding on those vibes from the local community with lots of worries and concerns. There were also big changes in harmful sexual behaviour guidance and a lot of children were talking about it more, a lot of parents were also talking about it more, and it was something that we felt we needed to tackle. The project offered us a unique and creative way to do that.”** (Teacher, School 20)

**“...we wanted to have a project that involved the community and to address the concerns everybody had, but also to demonstrate that we are working with the community and with young people to help them feel safe. And to address the concerns that they had and find ways as a community that we can tackle those feelings.”** (Teacher, School 20)

An interview with a teacher involved in the initiative at School 20 reflected on the challenges of engaging with stakeholders and partners. There is a question remaining about the cause of these challenges; it may have been practical but also potentially related to buy-in, in terms of the perceived ‘benefit’ among stakeholders.

**“...the timeline was tight so when we didn’t have people jump on board straight away it became clear that we needed a rethink. Had we had more interest, we could have advertised it a lot earlier and started fishing for that interest. I also think partners would have needed to find out what the benefit of them being involved in the project would be.”**



The initiative shifted focus to enabling young people at the school to attend a weekly after school club to produce creative materials which convey their perspectives and experiences to their parents/carers, with the aim of building trust and dialogue between young people, their parents/carers and staff through youth voice and participation. The teacher felt that the approach and process was beneficial for engaging the young people and encouraging them to feel willing and able to speak openly. In this regard, the shift in approach from the initial aim of stakeholder engagement was ultimately beneficial, including regarding alleviating any concerns the young people may have had about directly working with adult stakeholders.

**“...they became a lot more creative. They started getting involved in more of a conversation about what helps them feel safe, they talked about things that worried and bothered them and they’d bring things to each session that they wanted to talk about...what’s happened between their friends... and I think that having that different medium meant that they felt a bit safer. They all felt worried about being in front of people and talking about what they’ve been doing, especially around such sensitive topics, and there’s some young people that should they have needed to present what they wanted to say in public, it might have been very difficult for them.”**

The teacher interview indicated two clear benefits from the initiative. First, there was an immediate practical safeguarding benefit because the process elicited a disclosure from one of the young people, which could then be acted upon; the process of ‘opening up’ was deemed to be valuable to the young person themselves.

**“...we have had a couple of quite significant disclosures that have been life-changing, particularly for one young person. It’s enabled them to have a voice and to feel safer because they have been able to trust the adults around them, and because that they’d had that time and space to explore what was really worrying them. And because you were so open about the topics we could look at, they chose topics that were related to their own safeguarding issue. I think for them they’ve now got that confidence to be able to speak out things that were not okay and I think it’s really helped with her healing as well.”**

Second, the teacher valued the opportunity to hear from young people about their perceptions and experiences of safety across the school and community and the changes that they felt could be made, for example regarding safeguarding processes and the location and supportiveness of staff. This benefit related to longer term change for preventative safeguarding.

**“...we spoke about areas of the school that made them feel safe or made them not feel safe. I think what was really telling was it was about the people and where certain staff were located in school that made them feel safe... comments about when people are unkind to each other, and we spoke a lot about online and how that comes into school and how that can make them feel unsafe as well. It was interesting to hear the interplay between all of those things as well.”**

This teacher was open to the idea of learning from young people about what constitutes effective practice.

**“...what I’d like to see is the group being part of looking at how we can make the safeguarding policy more child friendly, more understandable. They’ve been given the opportunity also to do student voice and we fed that back into the governors as well to let them know how the children feel about safety in school.”**

Building dialogue with young people can, therefore, be beneficial for safeguarding and for identifying areas to embed preventative change. The teacher said it enables them to “tick boxes” for safeguarding but also create deeper change in the approach.

As discussed above regarding the nature of safeguarding, the interview with the teacher indicated that the relationship-based practice required for eliciting and harnessing youth voice involves skill and commitment. The teacher described finding the process enjoyable and rewarding.

**“To have the freedom to be able to speak... about important issues to them [children and young people] - and to know what it is that is important to them – it’s really quite reassuring. And also, it’s quite refreshing to be able to do something very**

positive and upbeat and something that kind of works along with what the kids want to talk. You get to know a lot more about what drives children and what really worries them. They tell us every day in the formal conversations with them, but to have informal conversations in a really relaxed environment, I think has made that for me, personally, really nice. I've really enjoyed it..."

They said that other adults should likewise welcome and value these kind of initiatives, but recognised that it may be daunting at first. However, they maintained that doing so can enable adults to find out a lot about what may be happening for young people and can, moreover, witness the benefit of supporting young people to actively participate and contribute to creating change.

**"...it felt daunting to start off with because I did think 'oh my days, what are we going to uncover? What can of worms lies underneath here?' - it felt massive at first, but doing a project like this and having a group that talks about safety and what that feels like. Actually, I think [it] is something more schools need to do. It's something I would like to continue to do in school or promote within schools because it has been very useful. I think from a safeguarding lead's point of view, it's quite satisfying you can also get the benefits from it. As a safeguarding lead, often we have to report to governors and to the leadership team about the work that we're doing and you need the student voice. And we're being told in every serious case review, we're told constantly the voice of the child is really important -but having that voice of the child starts with them just talking about safety, and actually that's really powerful. So, I think for me, it's not being scared to set up groups like this and to encourage more people to get involved."**

From the perspective of this teacher, the initiative powerfully demonstrates the positive impact of youth-led/centred approaches that harness young people's active participation and agency. However, interviews with some of the young people involved in the initiative belied a more complex picture. Three young people were interviewed about their experiences of the initiative. Participant 1 (P1) was seemingly quite difficult to engage in the interview, sharing only brief responses to the questions asked by the interviewer. For example, when asked about why they became involved with the club, they responded "dunno" and then elaborated that they were "forced

to" by a teacher and described the club as an opportunity to "get food and drinks so you don't have to go home starving." They valued not having to "go home" but also that the worst part of the programme was having to be "here in school."

P1 described engaging in creative tasks connected to their "mental health," whereby they "did a mask to, like, hide away my sadness." They were concerned about "bullying" and felt that reducing bullying in school would improve their mental health.

Overall, however, P1 was not particularly reflective about the group in the interview. This data may reflect a general disengagement from the initiative or, perhaps, discomfort with participating in the interview.

Participant 2 (P2) was more engaged and reflective during the interview. They described the group as better than expected because it involved animations and drawing rather than writing tasks.

They focused on issues of bullying.

**"I've drawn in my notebook to show why bullying was wrong. It will be a flipbook animation video... Bullying is bad. Stop bullying. It doesn't make anyone feel better, even the bully."**

Like P1, they described wearing a mask to keep oneself safe on an immediate level amidst bullying but said that this is not necessarily a full solution because of the need to open up at some point and/or with some people. In other words, wearing a mask may offer some protection but one must "take off your mask" to trusted people.

**"...most people wear a mask. You can't really trust most people so you might feel like hiding behind something is the right thing to do ...but maybe you should talk to someone... because with some people we trust we have to tell our feelings to... tell them how you really feel because if you just keep your feelings to yourself, nothing will get better."**

P2 reflected on how bullying makes people feel unsafe and can reduce the willingness to come into school but that young people do not always want to be open about this with adults.

**“...if their parents are like “yeah, why don’t you want to go to school?” And we’re like “oh, I feel sick” or something. They won’t tell the truth because they don’t feel safe to tell the truth.”**

They also referred to online bullying, for example cruel comments or digitally capturing disclosures and then threatening to release them.

**“...text messages is like a cyber-bullying thing, like you’ve added someone who’s like “oh yeah, tell me your secrets, I’m fine, I’ll keep them all”. You’ve added them and you’re like “yeah, I’ve got a secret, I’ve got a crush on such and such” or something like that, and then they like screenshot it or something and they use against you to make you do what they want and stuff. And they’re like “ha-ha, you have a crush on this person, and if you don’t do what I say I’ll tell everyone, so everyone knows.”**

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P2 found the club “fun” and valued the opportunity to be creative but also, like P1, the food.

Finally, Participant 3 (P3) also mentioned the food and the presence of a friend and the club offering “something to do.”

**“I’m going to be honest, it’s because [P2] told me there was food and I thought ‘ooh, I’ll go!’ And I also came because [friend’s name] was going and I’m mates with them.”**

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They were quite positive about the experience and ‘interested’ in the initiative as it got going:

**“I kind of got interested, I guess, it started interesting me, so I was like, ooh, I’ll keep going.”**

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They said they did not have too many expectations but on reflection, consider the initiative as being about “mental health.”

**“I just thought it was just some meet up club, to be honest...”**

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Like P2, a mask was used as a metaphor for showing or hiding one’s emotions, whereby what is apparent on the outside may be different to inside.

**“...the idea behind my mask was like two emotions: one you showed people, one you don’t. So, the outside of the mask is like happiness, what other people see, and then on the inside of the mask is what’s really going on, what’s happening inside.”**

For P3, this metaphor was a way of articulating internal struggles that may not always be visible, including experiences with “anger” and “anxiety”. They had undertaken some self-directed research around anger and what it means to be healthy in one’s expression of anger, informed by the process of designing the presentation as part of the club. P3 said they valued the opportunity to “get things off their chest” which has been helpful and aided them in speaking openly with their parents.

Overall, the interviews about the initiative raise some key points for consideration. First, do young people always know what they are signing up for when presented with opportunities like these? There is a need to balance the rights to be fully informed with the open-minded willingness to take a chance with an opportunity that may end up being valuable, even if in unexpected ways. Indeed, the teacher reflected on how the initiative started to gain traction with young people near the end of the period. They reflected on the need to consider how to convey initiatives like this to young people in ways that are enticing.

**“...as we were getting towards the end of the project, more and more young people have kind of gravitated towards the group after school and have wanted to be part of it... had they known what was going on at the start they would have been part of it, I think. Having a project like this, having that kind of canvassing ...that excitement around what could be achieved and what the young people get out of it, I think it’s really important.”**

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For this teacher, ensuring that there is trust in the initiative among young people and that they feel they will be able to contribute positively is important.

**“...a project where you’re talking to young people about being safe and what that really means - it doesn’t sound like the most exciting after school group to attend, so it was - I think - having young people that really trusted in the department in**

**school. Thinking, you know what, you really are going to enjoy this, and it'll be really nice for you to come and speak, and you would be a voice of transformation within the school, I think was really powerful for them."**

Second, the creative nature of the process seemed vital and underscores the benefits of incorporating creative methods into initiatives designed to elicit youth voice. These methods may help young people to express themselves in ways they deem safe and meaningful. Importantly, however, it requires a supportive approach from school staff; the teacher interviewed about the initiative was clearly committed to valuing youth voice and was open to learning and change as a result. It was not just a tick box exercise for safeguarding but a process that could lead to fundamental transformation of practice and culture. Without this orientation, the legitimacy and credibility of such initiatives may be jeopardised, because young people may perceive them to be tokenistic.

On the other hand, practical aspects like the provision of food also seems important but perhaps should be an ancillary benefit rather than the sole or main motivation for participation.

Finally, the interviews with young people indicate a focus on mental health. While safety and mental health and wellbeing are associated concepts, there needs to be consideration of the emphasis on mental health and whether there should be a broader framing of the challenges regarding safety and greater inclusion of young people who may not have compromised mental health but nevertheless relevant and important perspectives on safety. The output of this work during the afterschool club was a short film featuring students' voices about what changes they would make to feel safer at school and in their community. These messages were conveyed via various creative methods such as flip-book animations, presentations, painted masks and a montage of comments from some wider student voice work. The content of the student's work demonstrated their concerns about a range of issues including HSB, grooming and exploitation, and wider issues around bullying. The short film was intended to be sent to all parents/carers and community partners so that they could hear directly from the students about school and community safety issues.

The final film was not fully produced before the main contact at this school moved on to a regional safeguarding role. However, having been present at the after-school club for two terms, this teacher was able to use much of the content raised in the group to develop a social media campaign for parents/carers, sharing the messages raised in the after-school club on the school's social media pages and in newsletters.

**"It's been a journey! Our plans needed to adapt as we went along, so when we knew we couldn't get enough community partners committed to attending the showcase event in time, we switched our focus to creating the film. The students found this freeing I think, and became less worried about needing to speak in front of people and more free to focus on what they actually wanted to say. I know how meaningful the work was to them because of the disclosures they made and the safeguarding we have now been able to put in place on the back of that information. Sitting in the group over those few months gave me insights and evidence about what was important to the students, then I was able to use that to shape how I communicated safeguarding messages to parents. Although we ran out of time to share the film before I left, that work will be picked up by my colleagues and I know it will have an impact because it has already changed how we think about our work with parents. It has shown the importance of including student voice in our messages to parents. Sort of like a triangle between schools, parents and students, where we are thinking about all those different angles to create better communication. If we can focus on what is important, what's in the middle of that triangle between school, parents and students, it means we can all be on the same page...on the same team, if you like. When we know what is important to students, we know parents will care more about that and then we can get more consistency between home and school." (School 20 DSL)**

In summary, the insights gained from this work exploring how to support parents/carers to support their children demonstrates:

- The value of creating three-way communication between schools, parents and carers and students to share consistent messaging

# 4. What we recommend

## 4.1 Recommendations

Our recommendations are based upon our analysis of cross-cutting themes and promising practice.

### **Safeguarders are safeguarded by:**

Recommendation 1: Providing sufficient time, training and support to DSLs

Recommendation 2: Developing the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB

Recommendation 3: Maximising multi-agency safeguarding relationships using relationship-based practice

### **RSHE content and pedagogy is enhanced by:**

Recommendation 4: Moving towards a 'tools not rules' approach

Recommendation 5: Using principles from the 'Real Respect' programme as an example of 'the what' and 'the how' of effective RSHE

Recommendation 6: Strategically co-ordinating the role of external providers

### **Parents and carers are supported to support their children by:**

Recommendation 7: Creating school-parent/carer-student triads to share consistent messaging

We made similar recommendations in our responses to a recent Department for Education (DfE) call for evidence on safeguarding practice in schools and colleges (see appendix 1) and a consultation to seek views on the proposed changes to statutory guidance on RSHE (see appendix 2).



## 4.2 Revisiting questions from the year one report

In the report for the end of the project's first year, we posed questions to consider in the project's second and third years. Many questions remain open for further consideration but some can be answered here with what we learned. Our recommendations, from year 2.

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

Improving HSB reporting rates seems to be hampered by factors relating to school and student cultures. Moreover, there is a question regarding the extent to which HSB will be solved through reporting to adults and adult intervention. We acknowledged in the year one report that young people need to be given tools to deal with some problems themselves and to recognise their role in transforming school cultures. These tools need to be realistic and applicable for use in young people's day-to-day peer contexts, empowering students to feel safe, take action and ask for help where needed. Moving towards a skills-based RSHE curriculum where students have opportunities to practice decision-making, risk assessment and perspective-taking could harness the power of RSHE as a key vehicle for the prevention of HSB, through tackling the underlying causes of the behaviours and through raising awareness among young people about what constitutes HSB so that they are equipped to identify, report and respond to the behaviours that they may see or experience. With the right approach to building dialogue between educators and students within RSHE, young people may be more likely to tell adults in school about HSB which can improve adult understanding about the issues faced by young people and their safeguarding responses.

This recommendation is not about leaving young people to solve the issues alone or without adult support. It is instead about recognising that supporting young people cannot only involve adults doing things to or for young people. We need adults to understand young people's perspectives to inform what support they need from adults to develop safe and healthy peer cultures and relationships for themselves over the longer term. As young people will increasingly have experiences and relationships beyond the direct purview of

adults, it is important that adults acknowledge that they will not always be present to respond straightaway and that they need to support young people's developing agency and autonomy.

Recommendation 4: Moving towards a 'tools not rules' approach

The following two questions are grouped together as the promising practice identified in the 'Real Respect' programme goes at least some way to answering them.

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

In year one we suggested that a purely incident-driven approach will not fully address the complex underlying causes of HSB and may represent a missed opportunity to meaningfully engage with the contexts in which young people are developing. We identified a need to develop interventions that engage with social norms and the social-emotional dimensions of sex and relationships for young people, identifying relevant parts of their 'ecosystem' as media, families, wider communities, which need to be integrated within any intervention. Such work lends itself well to a primary prevention approach offered to all students before any HSB concerns have arisen and the discussion around content and pedagogy from the 'Real Respect' programme is pertinent here.

### What could an integrated approach to HSB interventions look like?

Recognising these complexities and the fluidity of development and experience may help in understanding why providing information, and associated knowledge and awareness-raising, does not always correspond with hoped-for behaviour and attitude change. Examples pertain to why understanding the law on consent does not mean that sexual experiences are always consensual and why being able to list the traits of healthy and unhealthy relationships does not prevent young people from experiencing unhealthy relationships.

A more integrated approach would provide young people with the skills, critical awareness, and emotional literacy they need to connect knowledge to attitudes and behaviour. Again, the 'what' and 'how' of the 'Real Respect' programme offers insight here.



Recommendation 5: Using principles from the 'Real Respect' programme as an example of 'the what' and 'the how' of effective RSHE

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

We identified in year one that an effective 'whole school approach' requires consistency across, and a recognition of the intersections between, policies and practices to avoid unintended consequences. This year, we have reflected on the role that DSLs and RSHE educators play in the preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding of young people affected by HSB in schools, and what time, training and support they need to effectively fulfil these roles.

Recommendation 1: Providing sufficient time, training and support to DSLs

Recommendation 2: Developing the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB

Recommendation 3: Maximising multi-agency safeguarding relationships using relationship-based practice

### **How can teachers be better supported to deliver effective Relationships, Sex and Health Education?**

Another school-level challenge potentially relates to the design and delivery of RSHE policy and curriculum. RSHE holds the scope to play a key role in prevention, alongside more responsive and remedial safeguarding following incidents of HSB. There is, however, perhaps a need for specialist RSHE teachers or more consistent use of expert specialists. We asked in year one whether RSHE needs to be made more professional and systematic, while recognising the importance of variability between schools and discretion for school leaders and teachers to design and deliver curriculum and pedagogy that is relevant and impactful in their contexts. While various models of RSHE delivery may be effective, it could be argued that even if only some teachers are involved, the wider staffing body needs to buy-in to addressing the problem because of the significance of language, attitudes, and responses among all staff.

This year we have further explored this question by examining the role of external providers in the delivery of RSHE.

Recommendation 2: Developing the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB

Recommendation 3: Maximising multi-agency safeguarding relationships using relationship-based practice

# 5. Conclusions and next steps

## Conclusions

The findings from year two are consistent with, while extending and deepening, what we learnt in year one. The shift in focus from issues faced by students to issues faced by staff emphasised the pressing need to 'safeguard the safeguarders' and to consider what DSLs really need to fulfil their increasing responsibilities. Our evidence demonstrates that what DSLs really need is time, training and support. This is especially significant when we consider the pivotal role that DSLs play in preventing, responding to and remediating incidents of HSB in schools. Our work with school nurses highlighted the value of multi-agency safeguarding partnerships, particularly where a shared relationship-based approach is adopted by schools and external partnership agencies.

We identified in year one that a 'knowledge-practice' gap exists, whereby students may be able to absorb and reproduce the factual information taught in RSHE lessons, without any guarantee of behaviour change. Students and staff acknowledge the need to move towards a 'tools not rules' curriculum to enable skills practice. We have highlighted the 'Real Respect' programme as promising practice in both content and pedagogy, offering it as an example of 'the what' and 'the how' of effective RSHE.

Finally, the need to work in effective partnerships with other agencies and with parents/carers reflects a recognition that schools cannot solve the problem of HSB alone. Partnerships need to be supportive and tailored to the needs of the families within particular school communities and interventions based in the wider local community setting (rather than solely in schools) may hold real value to achieve consistent messaging at school and at home, we have identified examples of three-way communication involving school-parent-student initiatives.

## Next steps

All ten year three schools have been recruited and the majority of planned work has already been delivered. Findings from year three will be shared in a final project report in spring 2025.

Questions arising from year two's findings to be explored in year three include:

How can we support schools to more effectively lever support from their wider community?

How can schools more confidently access external providers to share their expertise to address specialist topics?

Does the protective behaviours approach also hold promise as a shared approach to multi-agency safeguarding if partner agencies undertake common training?

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# 7. Appendices

Appendix One: LFF's submission to the DfE's call for evidence regarding the Keeping Children Safe in Education

## **Response to the Safeguarding Children in Schools and Colleges call for evidence**

### **Background**

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is a UK wide child protection charity that is unwavering in its commitment to preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation. We are in a unique position because we are one of only a few organisations tackling the problem at source by working with those perpetrating abuse or at risk of doing so. We run the Stop It Now helpline, the largest helpline of its kind in the world for people concerned about their own sexual thoughts and behaviour towards children and anyone concerned about child sexual abuse, and we support more than 8,000 callers who make more than 16,700 calls each year. We also operate self-directed interventions online (self-help) for those concerned about their online or offline sexual behaviour towards children. Annually, we assess risk in hundreds of adults and adolescents and provide groupwork interventions to several hundred more. Where abuse has occurred, our teams advise statutory agencies on case management and provide intervention programmes to rebuild family safety. Our preventative work includes early intervention programmes for families considered at risk of harm and public education. We also work to prevent harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) amongst young people through our work in schools and our programmes designed for young people themselves. This includes our website and live chat service 'Shore'. The only resource of its kind in Europe and one of only three in the world, 'Shore' is for young people concerned about their own sexual thoughts or behaviour or that of a friend. In addition, we deliver training across the UK and the sector, reaching more than 2,000 frontline workers a year, including those in law enforcement, education and social care.

Our mission is simple – to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. It is this mission that draws all of our varied services together because child sexual abuse is preventable, not inevitable. It is with this mission in mind and over 30 years of experience in working to prevent child sexual abuse that we have approached this consultation.

We have focussed our response on the questions where we can support with evidence from our three-year action research project working with 30 schools across the Midlands called 'Everyone's Safer'. The aim of the project is to develop effective leadership responses to harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) in the schools and identify changes and activities that would help prevent future harmful sexual behaviours in their communities. A further aim of the project is to share insights arising from the research with schools more widely beyond those directly involved.

The findings from the first year of this research (January 2022 – December 2022) are summarised here and the second year report into our work during January – December 2023 will be published on our webpage for schools next month. We make seven recommendations in our second-year report, three of which directly relate to this call for evidence:

Recommendation 1: Providing sufficient time, training and support to DSLs

Recommendation 2: Developing the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB

Recommendation 3: Maximising multi-agency safeguarding relationships

## Our response:

Q12. We would appreciate any further brief description of how the designated safeguarding lead duties are split in your setting.

In our work with over 80 schools across the UK each year (which includes our ten school research sites and an additional 70 schools supported via our Stop It Now helpline) we see a wide range of scenarios regarding how DSL duties are carried out.

Our first recommendation to provide sufficient time for DSLs was based upon concerns raised during our research with DSLs, including:

- Where the DSL role is carried out by a headteacher or a senior leader, their capacity to fulfil this role can be limited by competing priorities.
- Deputy DSLs often have concurrent teaching commitments and experience differing levels of support, training and trust from their DSL.
- Best practice is for the DSL role to be full-time and protected, but many DSLs reported their protected time is often eroded by understaffing and stretched budgets. One DSL told us she “feels sick” knowing that she has ultimate responsibility for safeguarding yet very little time to directly deliver safeguarding or supervise/monitor her deputies.
- DSLs welcome workforce development, such as Senior Mental Health Lead training, which develops expertise across a team to share safeguarding responsibilities and ease time pressures.

Q14. Is the job description of the designated safeguarding lead role as set out in Annex C an accurate reflection of the role in your experience?

The DSLs we work with suggest that their role is rapidly evolving and becoming increasingly complex. As thresholds for statutory services continue to rise across many parts of the UK, DSLs report that social care functions often outweigh education functions in their day-to-day work, but they do not feel sufficiently trained, supported, supervised or equipped for the responsibilities of this aspect of the role. Annex C reflects the wide areas of expertise needed, with new and emerging

requirements arising regularly. It is clear that most local authority level three safeguarding training does not fully equip DSLs to fulfil this complex and multi-faceted role. Some schools provide additional inhouse or MAT training but this varies widely between schools so there is no consistent approach to training DSLs.

The Ofsted rapid review report in 2021 evidenced the prevalence and impact of HSB in schools, highlighting it as a priority issue. However, though DSLs are also required to complete Prevent duty training and strongly advised to attend (or work closely with a colleague who has attended) Senior Mental Health Lead training, there is no recommended training to equip them to manage harmful sexual behaviour in schools, despite the new guidance on the topic in KCSIE 2021 and KCSIE 2022. This evidence led to our first recommendation: providing sufficient time, training and support to DSLs.

Q15. What changes if any would you like to see in Annex C that may support the designated safeguarding lead role?

There is no mention in Annex C about the importance of DSLs being appropriately supported and supervised to perform their role. There are multiple mentions of their role in supporting other staff, students, parents and multi-agency colleagues, but our findings indicate that the DSL role description should include recommendations for DSLs to access effective in-house or external supervision, similar to social workers. In theory, the DSL is supervised by a member of SLT or the headteacher, but in practice, this supervision varies widely in frequency, quality and effectiveness. DSLs tell us that line management supervision can feel like performance management where there are barriers to openly discussing their wider difficulties and concerns. Given their pivotal role in safeguarding children and families, we do not see evidence of sufficient attention and resource spent on ‘safeguarding the safeguarders.’ Our findings highlight the significant emotional impact of the safeguarding role upon many staff, leading to stress, illness, burnout and leaving the education profession. It is imperative that staff are supported to manage this aspect of the role so that they can continue to keep children safe. These findings also contributed to our first recommendation: providing sufficient time, training and support to DSLs.

**Q16. At present, we set out the designated safeguarding lead role and the job description in Annex C. This ensures that the designated safeguarding lead role is given sufficient weight in statutory guidance. We would like to hear how we could best support designated safeguarding leads in their role.**

The focus of our research is on supporting effective leadership responses to HSB in schools so we are answering this question solely from the perspective of HSB and not in respect of other aspects of the DSL role. As we near the end of our three-year project, our evidence highlights the need for specialist HSB prevention training for DSLs (or another member of their team so as to share the safeguarding workload and develop an effective safeguarding workforce). We ask that the DfE consider an HSB Prevention Lead training recommendation, similar to the guidance set out in para. 182 – 184 of KCSIE 2023 regarding the senior mental health lead programme. At LFF, we are working on a national HSB prevention lead training course and would be delighted to collaborate with the DfE on its development and implementation.

This forms the basis of our second recommendation: developing the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB.

**Q17. We intend to run a further round of DfE-run webinars on a variety of topics to support you in your role. Which three topics would you find most useful?**

In year one of our research, education staff identified three main concerns that affect the vast majority of the schools we work with. We have based our suggested topics on the cross-cutting issues we identified relating to HSB:

Topic 1: Image-sharing - to include concerns around generative AI.

Topic 2: The impact of pornography: how to facilitate safe and meaningful conversations.

Topic 3: Understanding issues of consent and sexual harassment, online and offline.

**Q19. We realise that some schools and colleges teach children from different local authority areas, therefore differences in local arrangements,**

**approach, thresholds, and support offers can bring additional difficulties for schools and colleges. What issues does this present?**

Some schools we work with (in particular some PRUs/special schools who serve a wide catchment area) are working with multiple different local authorities. One such school, based in the West Midlands, has multi-agency safeguarding arrangements with six different local authorities which presents significant challenges, such as identifying which referrals processes to use. Navigating the different systems is confusing and time-consuming for the DSL and has been identified as a significant barrier to information-sharing, an issue shared by other schools we work with. Additional and related issues arise in voluntary sector support services where funding is often linked to postcodes/boroughs and services cannot be universally provided to all students. Recognising the need for additional time and information to negotiate these complex arrangements is important to ensure DSLs can fulfil these demands.

**Q20. How have you dealt with these issues?**

We have started to test some multi-agency safeguarding training to see if we can assist in developing a shared approach between various agencies. Our year two report details how protective behaviours training was delivered to local schools and their school nurse team; findings suggest that such training helps to foster closer working relationships and can reduce barriers to communication. This work led to our third recommendation: maximising multi-agency safeguarding relationships. We will further test this approach in year three and will report back in June 2025 with more evidence.

**Q27. Do your local safeguarding partners provide designated safeguarding lead training?**

**Q28. If yes, in your opinion, is it useful? Sometimes.**

We are aware of a mixed picture across the local authorities we work with, where some local authorities do offer DSL training (such as Worcestershire) some don't (such as Sandwell) and others are about to begin offering it in September 2024 (such as Warwickshire). We have been commissioned by schools across the UK to provide training on KCSIE updates and generic safeguarding, even where their local authority provides their own

course, which demonstrates that the current DSL training is not always sufficient. Additionally, DSLs have told us that they do not feel equipped to do their role with the level three training they have completed with their local authority. This evidence led to us making our first two recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Providing sufficient time, training and support to DSLs

Recommendation 2: Developing the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB.

**Q49. Are you seeing an increase in the number of incidents of child-on-child abuse in your school or college? Yes.**

**If yes, we are keen to understand the types of incidents you are dealing with?**

DSLs are telling us that they are dealing with increased numbers of HSB incidents in school. Many have reflected on whether this represents an actual increase in prevalence or is in fact a positive outcome of the recent focus on HSB which may have led to more reports. We support schools (via our Stop It Now helpline and our Everyone's Safer action research project) to respond to a whole range of issues, reflective of Professor Simon Hackett's continuum of sexual behaviours model. Incidents range from inappropriate sexualised language and noises in classrooms, unwanted touching and sexual harassment, through to sexual assault and rape. In our year one report we concluded that the issues that schools were facing most often were linked to sexual image-sharing, the impact of pornography upon sexual language, behaviour and school culture, and students not fully respecting consent in both online and offline situations.

**Q50. In relation to incidents where both the victim and perpetrator are in the same school or college, we understand that sharing classrooms can be an issue and are keen to understand the challenges around this. Is this an issue in your school or college? Yes**

**Q51. Are there any examples of best practice you could share on handling such incidents in this regard?**

All the schools we support via our helpline or

Everyone's Safer project are advised to take a children's rights approach - where the rights and needs of all children involved are identified and balanced. A recent case study example arose when a school contacted our helpline to seek advice after it was reported that a student had sexually assaulted his classmates by the unwanted touching of their genitals, above and under their clothing. We supported the school's safeguarding team to develop effective and proportionate safety plans for all students involved and provided therapeutic support from a trained counsellor to ensure their wellbeing needs were met.

The issue of proportionate safety plans is one we have sought to address in the development of a new safety planning template which is freely downloadable from our schools' webpage. We have seen that in an effort to safeguard children, some plans (often adapted from inappropriate adult risk management plans) are unduly restrictive and punitive. We support schools to redress the balance with a holistic assessment of a child's welfare needs and strengths.

**Q52. How best could we help schools and colleges to handle such incidents?**

The DfE could publish a link to LFF's schools' webpage in future iterations of KCSIE so that more schools are aware of the support and resources freely available to them. The Stop It Now helpline is also available for education staff to discuss any concerns and seek advice about children sharing a classroom or other areas around school following an incident of HSB.

**Q53. Still thinking about child-on-child abuse responses, KCSIE is clear that where a child has been harmed, is at risk of harm, or is in immediate danger, schools and colleges should make a referral to local authority children's social care. Any report to the police will generally be in parallel with a referral to local authority children's social care. Are there any gaps we could address in the "Reporting to the police" section in Part five as currently drafted? Yes**

**If yes, please expand:**

We have several case studies of schools struggling to manage the aftermath of reporting an incident to the police, largely owing to three main issues:

- A lack of information shared with schools whilst police investigations are ongoing.
- Bail conditions that cannot be managed in school, resulting in a student being educated at home without evidence to suggest that the student poses a risk to other students.
- Confusion about what remedial work can be done during an open investigation with a young person who has displayed HSB.

Q54. As currently drafted are there any areas in Part 5 which could helpfully be clarified? To address the issues identified above, further guidance could be provided in:

- Para 514: *“If a school or college has questions about the investigation, they should ask the police. The police will help and support the school or college as much as they can (within the constraints of any legal restrictions).”*

Advice on guiding principles for decision-making in cases where the police cannot share information would be useful here.

Para’s 519 – 521 *“Whatever arrangements are in place, the school or college will need to consider what additional measures may be necessary to manage any assessed risk of harm that may arise within their institution. Particular regard should be given to: the additional stress and trauma that might be caused to a victim within the institution; the potential for the suspected person to intimidate the victim or a witness; the need to ensure that any risk management measures strike a balance between management of risk and the rights of an unconvicted person (e.g. rights to privacy, family life, etc). Careful liaison with the police investigators should help to develop a balanced set of arrangements.”*

An additional sentence advising schools that they can contact the Stop It Now helpline for advice in balancing bail conditions and children’s rights to education, privacy and family life would be useful here, with a link to our schools’ webpage.

Para 513 *“Whilst protecting children and/or taking any disciplinary measures against the alleged perpetrator(s), it will be important for the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) to work closely with the police (and other agencies*

*as required), to ensure any actions the school or college take do not jeopardise the police investigation.”*

We are in the process of co-producing with schools a series of reflective activities to work through after an incident of HSB has occurred. Schools tell us they need more support on what kind of remedial work they can do during an ongoing police investigation, so some guiding principles on what schools can and cannot undertake would be useful here.

Q71. Has your school or college had to deal with any safeguarding incidents relating to bringing your own devices?

We are aware of a number of incidents in various schools we work in, such as a boarding school where a student managed to find out a secured school wifi network password and use it to search for prohibited content on his mobile. Here, the school’s monitoring systems worked well as the search term triggered the filtering tool and the student’s device was identified.

An example of a monitoring system not working so effectively was at one PRU where a student was able to copy and paste instructions on how to make a pipe bomb from below an unrelated YouTube video and sent the message to all staff members on a Teams chat.

Most schools we work with tell us that their filtering and monitoring systems work well and detect any students who are using their own devices inappropriately (unless they use their own data and turn off wifi, which is of course more problematic as it is not possible to monitor private data use). However, of far greater concern for the DSLs we work with are the online safety issues that arise outside of the school grounds and school day yet spill over into school life.

Q71. Please provide any examples of best practice you could share on handling such incidents:

If schools are considering their approach to students bringing their own devices, there is useful guidance available via South West Grid for Learning’s [website](#) to help schools think through advantages and disadvantages.



Many of the schools we speak with have raised concerns about the proposed non-statutory guidance (February 2024) to prohibit mobile usage in schools being unhelpful. They say that they have largely already dealt with the issues arising from phone usage at school and have effective policies in place. They raise other, wider issues as being of more significance, such as how to work with parents and carers so that they support school policies and student's online safety outside of the school day.

**75. Do you anticipate any specific safeguarding risks arising from greater use of generative AI in schools and colleges? Yes**

**If yes, please expand:**

Similar to our answers to questions 71 and 72 above, the safeguarding concerns we hear from DSLs are more about how generative AI may be used outside of school than inside, because the majority of schools we work with already have excellent technology safeguarding policies in place which will protect students from current AI risks – though support with evolving and emerging issues would be welcomed.

**76. Have you dealt with any safeguarding cases that have arisen from a greater use of generative AI in schools and colleges? Yes**

**If yes, please provide further details:**

A school contacted us for support after a student used a 'nudify' app to generate indecent images of his classmates. He took group photographs of female classmates with their permission, then used the app to generate unlawful AI-generated images of them in various states of undress or nude. He shared the AI images, purporting them to be real, and was believed by other classmates which caused shame and distress to the girls involved.

**77. Do you have any safety concerns related to the use of generative AI for education purposes i.e. tools used within the classroom? Yes**

**If yes, please provide details of your concerns:**

If schools are using AI and encouraging students to use it as part of their education, staff need to be well-trained and supported so that they understand the full range of risks and harms – alongside the benefits. If teachers were to introduce a new AI

tool and promote only the positive uses, students could develop an unbalanced and unsafe view of AI. We refer back to our second recommendation: developing the workforce to fulfil preventative, responsive and remedial safeguarding around HSB so that staff are aware of the safeguarding risks of AI and are as familiar with it as any other tool.

We have tried to be as comprehensive in our responses to the above questions. However, if you have any questions arising out of our responses or would benefit from an expansion of any of the issues we have explored, we would be more than happy to further assist and meet to discuss.

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## Appendix two: LFF's submission to DfE's consultation for the Review of the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education statutory guidance

### Consultation response to the review of RSHE statutory guidance

#### Background

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is a UK wide child protection charity that is unwavering in its commitment to preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation. We are in a unique position because we are one of only a few organisations tackling the problem at source by working with those perpetrating abuse or at risk of doing so. We run the Stop It Now helpline, the largest helpline of its kind in the world for people concerned about their own sexual thoughts and behaviour towards children and anyone concerned about child sexual abuse, and we support more than 8,000 callers who make more than 16,700 calls each year. We also operate self-directed interventions online (self-help) for those concerned about their online or offline sexual behaviour towards children. Annually, we assess risk in hundreds of adults and adolescents and provide groupwork interventions to several hundred more. Where abuse has occurred, our teams advise statutory agencies on case management and provide intervention programmes to rebuild family safety. Our preventative work includes early intervention programmes for families considered at risk of harm and public education. In addition, we deliver training across the UK and the sector, reaching more than 2,000 frontline workers a year, including those in law enforcement, education and social care.

We also work to prevent harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) amongst young people through our work in schools and our programmes designed for young people themselves. This includes our website and live chat service '[Shore](#)'. The only resource of its kind in Europe and one of only three in the world, '[Shore](#)' is for young people concerned about their own sexual thoughts or behaviour or that of a friend. In terms of our work in schools, we are in the final year of our three-year action research project working with 30 schools across the Midlands called '[Everyone's Safer](#)'. The aim of the project is to develop effective leadership responses to harmful sexual behaviour in the schools and identify changes and activities that would help

prevent future harmful sexual behaviours in their communities.

A further aim of the project is to share insights arising from the research with schools more widely beyond those directly involved.

Our mission is simple – to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. It is this mission that draws all of our varied services together because child sexual abuse is preventable, not inevitable. It is with this mission in mind and over 30 years of experience in working to prevent child sexual abuse that we have approached this consultation. In particular, we have focussed our response on the areas where we can support with evidence from our work in schools and with young people to prevent harmful sexual behaviour. Additionally, we have drawn on our understanding of child sexual abuse and exploitation and the behaviours of those who commit child sexual abuse offences where relevant.

We have narrowed our discussion to the following areas where we feel we are most able to input:

1. Age restrictions; and
2. Harmful sexual behaviour

#### Age restrictions

The new proposed RSHE guidance introduces a set of age limits on various topics. Whilst we are of the view that the delivery of any RSHE curriculum topic must be delivered in an age appropriate manner, we are concerned about the imposition of age restrictions. Our concerns stem from the following:

- Lack of evidence-base
- Misalignment
- Unworkable in practice
- Risks to safeguarding

**Lack of evidence**

The evidence-base for the age restrictions within the new proposed RSHE guidance has not been provided as part of this consultation. In seeking to introduce age limits which schools must follow at all times, we think it vitally important that there is transparency around the evidence-base used to inform the age limits proposed. Without knowledge of the evidence-base behind the proposed age restrictions, it is difficult to provide comprehensive comment.

Further, due to the election period, there has been no opportunity to engage with the Department of Education in order to better understand the evidence upon which the age restrictions have been based. This coupled with a short consultation period of 8 weeks and no extension in view of the election period, has compounded the challenge.

**Misalignment**

Our review of the proposed age restrictions has led us to the belief that there is misalignment with:

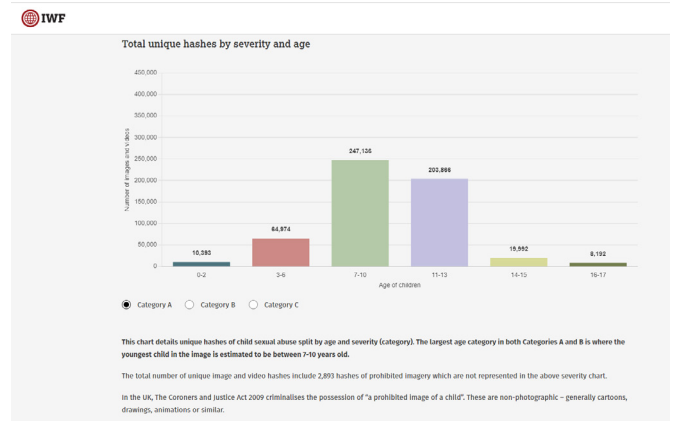
- What we know about child sexual abuse; and
  - What we know about children and their realities.
- We shall provide an example in respect of each.

In terms of child sexual abuse, we know that children of all ages are affected. Child sexual abuse is not specific to any age category or classroom year group. The proposed age restrictions include the following:

**“Pupils should know about circulating images and information and how to safely report to trusted adults the non-consensual creation or distribution of an intimate image. Pupils should understand that making, keeping or sending naked or sexual images of someone under 18 is a crime, even if the photo is of themselves or of someone who has consented, and even if the image was created by the child and/or using AI generated imagery. Pupils should understand the potentially serious consequences of asking for naked, semi-naked or sexual images, including the potential for criminal charges and severe penalties including imprisonment. This topic should not be taught before year 7.”**

We are hugely concerned that teachers would be restricted to discussing this topic in year 7 and not

before. This misaligns with data from the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), a charity which works to identify and remove imagery of child sexual abuse from the internet. The [2023 Annual Report of the IWF](#) shows that in terms of unique hashes by age and severity, the age category in which the most hashes were accumulated in respect of the most serious images, Category A, were children aged 7-10 years old. This was also true of Category B images.



In terms of the realities of the experiences of children, the proposed age restrictions provide the following:

**“Pupils should know the impact of viewing harmful content, including pornography, that presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others, and can negatively affect how they behave towards sexual partners. This can affect pupils who see pornography content accidentally as well as those who see it deliberately. The risks of inappropriate online content can be discussed in an age-appropriate way from year 7, however, the details of sexual acts should not be discussed before year 9.”**

We know that children younger and younger are accessing the internet and seeing inappropriate material at increasingly earlier ages. In relation to pornography, research published in 2023 by the Children’s Commissioner [‘A lot of it is actually just abuse’ Young people and pornography](#), found that by age 9, 10% of children had seen pornography, whilst by age 11, 27% of children had seen pornography.

There are just two examples of where we consider that the age restrictions do not align with what we know about child sexual abuse and the realities

of children's lives. Due to the misalignment with published data that we perceive, it is all the more important to understand the evidence-base behind the proposed age restrictions.

### ***Unworkable in practice***

We also consider that age restrictions will be unworkable in practice. Children need to be able to talk to teachers as trusted adults about topics of their choosing at times that are important to them. This will not be based on arbitrary age restrictions. Teachers need to be able to respond to the needs of the children in their classrooms as and when they arise. Children will ask questions that do not align with the age limits and teachers need to be able to respond in an age appropriate way.

The new proposed RSHE guidance makes it clear that:

**“Schools should seek to follow these age limits at all times. However, flexibility may be necessary in order to respond promptly to issues which pose an imminent safeguarding risk to their pupils. In certain circumstances, schools may decide to teach age-limited topics earlier, provided it is necessary to do so in order to safeguard pupils and provided that teaching is limited to the essential facts, without going into unnecessary detail. Parents must be informed in these cases and appropriate safeguarding measures put in place. For example, ...if a secondary school becomes aware of a problem with sexual abuse in Key Stage 3, it would be appropriate for the school to address this with pupils in order to tackle the behaviour promptly, make them aware of the risks and consequences and prevent it from happening in future. However, this does not mean schools should go into details of the sexual acts in question.”**

This is very restrictive and does not afford teachers flexibility as they can only respond to questions that don't match the age restrictions if there is an imminent safeguarding risk. The curiosity of children should not be circumscribed. And if teachers are not able to provide responses, children will seek answers elsewhere, for example online and from other sources that are not trusted or safe.

Further, if teachers can only stray from the age limits where there is an imminent safeguarding risk, it is too late and a child has likely come to harm. Opportunities to prevent children coming to harm

from child sexual abuse will have been missed. This will weaken rather than strengthen efforts to protect children from sexual harm.

In 2012, we piloted the Hedgehogs programme, an education initiative aimed at preventing child sexual abuse in primary schools. The Hedgehogs programme was spearheaded in recognition of the need to intervene at an early stage to increase young people's awareness of the risks, enhance their resilience in risky situations and ensure they know who to turn to for advice and support. The programme was focussed on children aged 9 to 11 years old. The [Hedgehogs Pilot Programme Evaluation Report Executive Summary](#) concluded that:

**“The feedback received from the Hedgehogs programme can go some way to demonstrate the positive impact it had on children's learning, awareness, and relationships with adults. Now that these 165 children have been equipped with the knowledge and tools to protect themselves, and with their parents', carers' and teaching staff's enhanced knowledge of the subject area and increased willingness to talk to the children about this, children should be better protected. Should the programme be delivered nationally, or indeed internationally, across all primary schools, the potential impact on children's safety and the reduction of child sexual abuse could be substantial.”**

The NSPCC's Talk PANTS programme is another example of an initiative to keep children safe from sexual abuse and is aimed at children even younger, from the start of school at the age of 5 years old. These examples demonstrate that prevention of child sexual abuse can be taught from ages much younger than suggested by the proposed age restrictions. And for prevention to be effective, it should be.

### ***Risks to safeguarding***

We are very concerned that the age restrictions to topics in the new proposed RSHE guidance could shut down conversations with children about potential child sexual abuse. Instead of shutting down conversations, we need to consider how RSHE might help teachers to open up those conversations.

We know that those who commit sexual crimes against children rely on secrecy and the silence of children to continue perpetrating their crimes. They use a number of coercive tactics, such as making children believe it is a special secret that others will not understand, and persuading children that they will not be believed or could get into trouble if they do speak out about the abuse. By making certain topics “off limits” with age restrictions, we could be playing into the hands of those who commit sexual crimes against children and reinforcing their coercive tactics.

We also know that many children do not disclose until they have reached adulthood. Some may never disclose. The true extent of child sexual abuse is therefore hidden. There are aspects of child sexual abuse which present barriers to children disclosing such as secrecy, shame, guilt, fear and often a feeling of complicity. The RSHE curriculum delivered in schools should attempt to break down those barriers rather than reinforce them.

The potential that a teacher could be the trusted adult for a child who has suffered child sexual abuse cannot be underestimated. A key finding of the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse in its report, [Key messages from research on identifying and responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse](#), is:

**“Teachers are the professionals to whom children will most commonly disclose, but the disclosure process can be helped or hindered by the way in which any professional engages with a child about whom concerns exist.”**

Added to this is research by the Children’s Commissioner, [Protecting children from harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action](#), which estimates that only 1 in 8 victims of sexual abuse come to the attention of statutory authorities. In order to bring child sexual abuse out into the light, we need teachers to feel empowered to have conversations, and potentially receive a disclosure of sexual abuse from a child. We do not want teachers backing away from being curious or responding to the needs of children as this places children at greater risk. We need teachers to be curious, approachable and interested, and our fear is that this could be hampered by the proposed age restrictions.

## Harmful sexual behaviour

Restricting teaching on topics strongly linked with HSB goes against all the available evidence on effective RSHE and safeguarding. Our experience working with professionals on the frontline in education as part of our [Everyone’s Safer](#) project tell us that students need more and earlier information on these topics, not less and later, as proposed.

We are making 3 recommendations on RSHE following the conclusion of the second year of this three-year project:

1. Moving towards a ‘tools not rules’ approach;
2. Using principles from the ‘Real Respect’ programme as an example of ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of effective RSHE; and
3. Strategic co-ordination for the role of external providers.

### ***Moving towards a ‘tools not rules’ approach.***

Young people need to be given tools to deal with some problems themselves and to recognise their role in transforming school cultures. These tools need to be realistic and applicable for use in young people’s day-to-day peer contexts, empowering students to feel safe, take action and ask for help where needed.

Moving towards a skills-based RSHE curriculum where students have opportunities to practice decision-making, risk assessment and perspective-taking could harness the power of RSHE as a key vehicle for the prevention of HSB, through tackling the underlying causes of the behaviours and, moreover, through raising awareness among young people about what constitutes HSB so that they are equipped to identify, report and respond to the behaviours that they may see or experience. With the right approach to building dialogue between educators and students within RSHE, young people may be more likely to tell adults in school about HSB which can, in turn, improve adult understanding about the issues faced by young people and their safeguarding responses.

### ***Using principles from the ‘Real Respect’ programme as an example of ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of effective RSHE.***

A theme across both years of our Everyone’s Safer schools project is ensuring that RSHE is maximally effective. This includes consideration of both content (what is being taught) and pedagogy (how it is taught). It is a continuing priority for schools to get both right.

The second year report into our work during January to December 2023 will be published on our webpage for schools imminently. In our second year, we reviewed a Home Office ‘Safer Streets’ funded programme as an example of what and how to teach effective RSHE on the topics of prejudice, harassment and sexual violence. ‘Real Respect’ is a Home Office Safer Streets funded project which aims to improve the emotional wellbeing of young people and develop their understanding of healthy relationships. It can be delivered as a one-to-one or group intervention and has differentiated session plans for primary and secondary schools. At the moment, Real Respect is delivered to small groups of students who have either displayed or are at risk of displaying HSB.

We highlight the Real Respect programme as promising practice for both content and pedagogy. It is an example of effective RSHE because:

- The content resonates with young people and addresses the pertinent issues surrounding HSB from their perspectives; and
- The styles of teaching and learning are participatory, active and engaging and impactful for young people.

In addition to the promising practice for both content and pedagogy, the Real Respect programme is also having a very positive impact on the students it has been delivered to. This includes changes in attitudes for the students the programme has worked with, more respectful behaviour and the avoidance of school exclusions. We have therefore recommended in our year two report that the principles applied by the Real Respect programme could be adopted and given a wider application to all students, not just those who have displayed or are at risk of displaying HSB.

### ***Strategic co-ordination for the role of external providers***

Schools cannot solve issues of prejudice, harassment and sexual violence alone. In addition to strong partnerships with parents and multi-agency colleagues, they need support to access the expertise of subject specialists. The Real Respect programme is an example of a programme which is delivered by highly skilled external facilitators, who are well placed to deliver education that challenges young people in impactful ways that resonate with rather than alienate them.

### **Conclusion**

We have outlined above our deep concerns about the new proposed RSHE guidance, particularly the adoption of age restrictions for specific topics. We are of the view that RSHE has a really important role to play in the prevention of child sexual abuse and this role should not be curtailed, particularly at a time when the threats posed to children by sexual abuse and other harms are only increasing.

We would like the new government to revisit the guidance with a view to optimising the opportunities for RSHE to contribute to the prevention of child sexual abuse. Additionally, any future revisions to the guidance must be based on evidence and should include wide and meaningful engagement with teachers, education leaders, safeguarding bodies, third sector organisations, academics, parents and most importantly children and young people themselves.

We would be happy to discuss any aspect of this response in more detail.

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