

Background

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Young people, the Welsh Government and many organisations have publicly shared their concern about the alleged prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among children and young people in Wales. Pupils tell us that this is happening face-to-face during school hours, but they also state that this is happening more online and after school.

Peer-on-peer sexual harassment, including online sexual harassment, is a societal issue that is also prevalent in adult life. The number of adults, in particular women, who have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space or online is extremely high, especially amongst 18 to 24-year-olds. A recent report on the 'Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in public places' by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women UK (2021) found that 71% of women of all ages in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space. As many as 86% of 18 to 24-year-old women said they have experienced sexual harassment. However, the number of women who reported the incident to the police is alarmingly low. The two main reasons women of all ages gave for not reporting incidents are:

I didn't think the incident was serious enough to report (55%) and

I didn't think reporting it would help' (45%) (APPG for UN Women UK, 2021, p.6).

However, 44% of women agreed that if reporting the incident would prevent it from happening again, they would be encouraged to report it.

Since June 2020, the anti-rape online community movement 'Everyone's Invited' (n.d.) has invited survivors of rape and sexual harassment to share their stories on the website with the aim of exposing rape culture through conversation, education, and support. Over 15,000 anonymous testimonies have been submitted and shared on the website. At the time of planning this work, the website included testimonies from pupils or ex-pupils about alleged peer-on-peer sexual harassment in 84 education providers in Wales. The schools named

include mainstream secondary and independent schools and a very few primary schools and further education colleges. The website also includes testimonies from pupils in providers of further and higher education in Wales.

Support for reform and change in attitudes towards sexual harassment and abuse, particularly towards girls and women, has grown considerably over the last three years through activities by organisations such as the '[Me Too' movement](#)' (2021) (A social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment where individuals publicise allegations of sexual crimes. The movement's aim is to empower victims to break silence and gain empathy and solidarity from others.) However, research shows that, in many cases, both males and females who experience sexual harassment do not pursue their complaints through the courts.

Through our work with pupils during school visits, we see that a similar problem exists in secondary schools^[1]. Pupils do not systematically tell their teachers about peer-on-peer sexual harassment. This is for a number of reasons:

- Young people feel that peer-on-peer sexual harassment has become normalised and almost expected.
- Their behaviours and attitudes are significantly influenced by what they see happening on social media.
- Children and young people turn more to the internet for support and guidance rather than talking with parents or other adults.
- Pupils say that teachers do not take peer-on-peer sexual harassment seriously enough.

^[1] ___ Where secondary schools are referenced, we include secondary-aged school pupils in all-age schools.

Welsh Government policy and guidance

Within the [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Act 2021](#) ([Senedd Cymru, 2021](#)), the Health and well-being Area of Learning and Experience (Area) will have equal status in law to five other areas of the curriculum (Languages,

Literacy and Communication, Mathematics and Numeracy, Science and Technology, Humanities, Expressive Arts). The Curriculum for Wales centres around 'The Four Purposes' or aims of the new curriculum. One of these four purposes under section 2(1) of the Act is 'to enable pupils and children to develop as healthy, confident individuals, ready to live fulfilling lives as members of society' (Welsh Government, 2020a). Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) will be a mandatory element of the Curriculum for Wales for pupils from the age of three onwards in primary schools as well as maintained nursery schools and non-maintained nursery settings from September 2022. Secondary schools who are ready to roll out Curriculum for Wales to pupils in Year 7 may do so from September 2022. However, RSE will not be mandatory until 2023 when it will apply to both Year 7 and Year 8 pupils in the first instance. The proposed draft RSE statutory guidance states:

Schools and settings have an important role to play in creating safe and empowering environments that support learners' rights to enjoy fulfilling, healthy and safe relationships throughout their lives. This is critical to building a society which treats others with understanding and empathy, whatever their ethnicity; social economic background; disability; or sex, gender or sexuality.

In addition, Section 64 of the Curriculum and Assessment Act (Senedd Cymru, 2021) contains duties for all staff to develop knowledge and understanding of children's human rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The Welsh Government has published several relevant guidance documents to support schools in establishing a culture of safeguarding and in promoting the importance of healthy relationships and positive attitudes towards diversity, including:

[Guidance for education settings on peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour](#) (Welsh Government, 2020b)

[Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: Responding to incidents and safeguarding children and young people - Keeping safe online - Hwb \(gov.wales\)](#) (Welsh Government, 2020c)

[Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: guidance for governors | GOV.WALES \(2016\)](#) (Welsh Government, 2016)

[Rights, respect, equality: Statutory guidance for governing bodies of maintained schools 2019](#) (Welsh Government, 2019a)

We have also published relevant reports on these themes. Specific Welsh Government departments and specialist support organisations have also created helpful resources for schools. A comprehensive list of relevant reports, guidance documents and resources are included in [Supporting Resources](#) document along with brief details of their content. These are all included to help schools plan and deliver both support and provision for promoting respect, positive relationships and diversity.