Why young people don't tell their teachers about peer-on-peer sexual harassment, and why schools do not know the extent of the problem

It is helpful to explore in more detail some of the reasons why schools are not aware of the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment, including considering why young people don't tell staff about their experiences.

Too many schools work reactively around this issue and are not proactive enough in their approach. In essence, they are too reliant on waiting for pupils to approach school staff with complaints or concerns. In the majority of schools, once staff are aware of a problem, there are processes in place to address it and incidents are dealt with appropriately. However, schools do not talk about peer-on-peer sexual harassment openly and regularly enough to enable pupils to speak up safely. In most schools, staff are unable to describe any measures their school have taken to proactively promote a culture where staff and pupils refute harassment and stand up to any negative attitudes towards sexuality or gender. Pupils in the same schools told us how much they want open, direct conversation about this so that issues are brought to the surface and called out.

There is often a lack of understanding of what constitutes peer-on-peer sexual harassment and how it impacts on pupils. School staff do not always have a complete understanding of what is covered within the term sexual harassment nor do they have a consistent comprehension of wider related issues to do with equality and diversity. There is also a variable level of tolerance for comments that are homophobic or sexist. In too many instances, staff ignore incidents or dismiss them as something less. Although reactive safeguarding processes are robust in schools, the wider culture of safeguarding to support pupils in this area is generally underdeveloped. This prevents pupils from understanding how abstract values such as 'kindness and respect' that schools pride themselves on promoting, can be translated into practice and thus become part of effective strategies to call out sexual harassment and homophobia.

Schools do not make productive and effective use of the data and information available to them to categorise and analyse incidences of

bullying and harassment. In many cases, schools do not systematically log incidences of sexual harassment. Under the [2019 statutory anti-bullying guidance](#) (Welsh Government, 2019a) there are clear reporting requirements for schools in terms of bullying and harassment. This includes reporting the number of prejudice related bullying incidents and bullying incidents based on sex, gender and sexuality. There are expectations for local authorities to collect termly data reports from schools. They are required to monitor equality data and advise schools on local trends. However, in the documentation seen during visits, it is clear that schools report few instances of bullying and rarely report harassment to the local authority. Leaders told us that they do not receive feedback from local authority officers regarding termly bullying reports. We engaged with over a third of all local authorities in Wales to enquire about how they used the data to inform planning. There is currently no statutory requirement for local authorities to respond to this information or to pass it on to the Welsh Government.

Most schools who use a digital or online information management system to record incidents and concerns, do not use it well enough to identify shortcomings or patterns of behaviour. Although staff at all levels have access to the system and, in many cases, use it well to share information with relevant leaders they do not make wider, more comprehensive use of these systems. In a few cases, the classification of 'bullying' is too broad and does not enable the school to record and evaluate instances of homophobic, sexist or even racially motivated bullying. In other examples, although a school may have a record of several incidents of verbal harassment, it is unable to state how many of these are related to sexual harassment. Clarifying the definitions of harassment and bullying would enable leaders to gather valuable information on trends and patterns of behaviour and plan suitable provision to respond to shortcomings. In addition, actions taken by schools are typically detentions or temporary in-house suspensions. There is little evidence of schools recording their restorative responses, although we know that schools do provide this, often in collaboration with external partners. Including detail of support and intervention for both victim and perpetrator would be useful and beneficial. In time, further analysis of the success of such provision on behaviour and attitudes would enable senior leaders to draw secure conclusions about the quality of leadership and provision through its impact on pupil wellbeing.

Schools' use of their local SHRN report to plan for provision and improvement is underdeveloped. Nearly all maintained secondary schools in Wales take part in the School Health Research Network (SHRN) survey, which is undertaken every two years. Pastoral leaders recognise the survey's importance and support its administration well. As well as published national reports using

the data, schools receive their own comprehensive 'Student Health and Wellbeing Report', which highlights strengths and areas for improvement in terms of pupils' standards of wellbeing, including issues of sexual behaviour. These reports contain high level analyses and are a powerful tool for schools to use for curriculum planning and to engage with pupils and parents on issues that come to light. However, overall, schools' use of their SHRN report to plan for provision and improvement is not effective enough. In a few cases, leaders acknowledge shortcomings and patterns of behaviour around sexual issues in their SHRN report but make few changes to provision.