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NSPCC submission to the Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry on Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools

1. Introduction

1.1 Given the growing urgency of this issue, demonstrated by the evidence we provide in this response and from the wider evidence base, we welcome the timing and scope of this inquiry on sexual harassment and sexual violence by the Women and Equalities Committee. At the NSPCC our access to children a young people means we know first hand from children the worries they have about the world, and the challenges they have to overcome. It is this knowledge, expertise and understanding of children which drives forward our policy goals. Last year around 1.2 million children and young people contacted the NSPCC's ChildLine service resulting in over 300,000 in-depth counselling sessions. We also reach out to children with a range of support, including delivering services to help children recover from sexual abuse and those displaying harmful sexual behaviour.

2. Executive Summary

- Data from the NSPCC's ChildLine service reveals a culture of sexual harassment which, starting from their school relationships, extends across the spectrum of children's' experiences, including online. It can leave them isolated, with many having no outlet to escape abuse.
- Schools too often do not have policies and practice in place that will keep children safe from this behaviour, and are prone to locating incidents of harmful sexual behaviour with the perpetrator and/or failing to consider what action they can take to prevent abuse from occurring. This must start with recognition that children are undergoing important identity shifts while at school, and staff must be able to recognise normal from harmful behaviour when assessing risk.
- Leadership is needed at all levels to tackle the issue. The Government has begun to make moves to address this by referencing the need for a 'whole school approach' to prevention of abuse in schools in national proposals. It must go further however by mandating PSHE in all schools, while schools must incorporate innovative approaches.
- The NSPCC has undertaken work to support this process by developing children led solutions in Wales, developing a 'keeping safe' project for schools in Northern Ireland with funding from the Department for Education, and developing a framework where schools can spot normal, age appropriate behaviour from risky or harmful behaviour.

3. Establishing the scale of the problem

3.1. The Women and Equalities Committee has already cited a considerable body of evidence which states the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence within schools. As such we thought it would be more beneficial for the inquiry to include statistics specifically relating to online abuse which will appear in research due to be published in the autumn.

- In 2015/2016 ChildLine carried out 1,392 counselling sessions relating to sexting, an increase of 15 per cent on the previous year.
- The 'sexting' advice page is the most viewed page on the ChildLine website.

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- In 2015/16 ChildLine carried out 25,740 counselling sessions where the main concern was bullying or online bullying.
- In 2015/16 ChildLine carried out 7,357 counselling sessions where children had raised concerns over online safety or cyber bullying.
- In 2014/15 ChildLine carried out 1,129 counselling sessions with children had raised concerns about being exposed to sexually explicit online images and/or content.

4. Understanding the impact of sexual harassment in schools

4.1. Qualitative analysis of the NSPCC's ChildLine service reveals how harmful sexual behaviour directly impacts on a young person's wellbeing if left unchecked and allowed to escalate. Many got in touch after experiencing inappropriate sexual touching and verbal threats that occur on school buses, in the playground, toilets, changing rooms, and in classrooms during lessons. Girls told ChildLine about their private areas being touched and having sexually explicit things said to them. This could sometimes escalate into more threatening behaviour. Many girls also reported feeling vulnerable, anxious, and confused about being pressurised for sex by boys at school. Some feel that they should consent as their peers all talked about being sexually active. Others were threatened with physical violence if they refused and had rumours and lies spread about them.

4.2. Both boys and girls in the NSPCC's Boys and Girls Speak Out study talked about receiving sexually harassing texts, even if they were also aware of how to block these kinds of messages. Overall the research found that children were ill-equipped to deal with sexual harassment and very few felt comfortable talking about these issues with parents or teachers. Our ChildLine findings also revealed that this culture of harassment extended to children and young people's online experiences, with many citing the pressure they faced to participate in online sexual activity with other children they know from school. This can have a huge bearing on their lives. Preliminary findings from yet to be published NSPCC research shows that online abuse impacts young people to the same degree as offline sexual abuse, with the majority of the study group exhibiting severe or very severe depression and anxiety while also demonstrating moderate to high levels of shame, stigma, betrayal.

4.3. Despite these concerns, the evidence from ChildLine reveals a frustrating world where children and young people do not know who to turn to when they need help, and where disclosures are too often only made after a serious incident has occurred. It is notable that even those children and young people who got in touch with ChildLine typically only did so during or after an investigation involving the school or police. They tell us about how difficult it was for them to report an incident, and their embarrassment when describing the details of what had happened. Some described how their disclosure only made a situation worse. This left them feeling very alone, with many believing that nobody understood what they were going through, leading them to turn to self-harming to cope with their emotions. Some had suicidal thoughts.

5. What can be done to reduce levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools?

5.1. We all have a responsibility to ensure that children are safe. The fact that schools form such a fundamental part of children's lives means that school staff and communities have an especially important role. Yet it is at school that children will form many of the relationships and learn many of

the behaviours which will have an important bearing on how they make the transition into adulthood. As with bullying and homophobia/transphobia, this means protecting children from harmful sexual behaviour and ensuring that they can rely on staff to support them when things go wrong or they feel unsafe. It is also crucial to remember that schools are nurturing children through a critical period in their lives when they are actively negotiating and learning about the ways sexuality affects them and their lives. Schools, like the family and the wider community, have a responsibility to make sure that children can explore these important shifts in in a healthy, positive way, and without fear of harassment and violence.

5.2. This sits at the heart of what the Secretary of State for Education has described as a 'whole school approach.' Nicky Morgan has emphasised the need for schools to help children and young people become decent, happy, well-balanced citizens. It is important to unpick what practical steps schools can undertake to deliver on this approach, and understand where the prevention of sexual harassment and violence sits within this scope. Schools therefore have a key role in promoting a culture which gives rise to respectful, positive relationships within the student body and recognises the way in which students interact with one another both in school and online.

5.3. The NSPCC has already undertaken work which can help schools determine sexual behaviour among children which is not normal, or age and developmentally appropriate, which they can utilise as part of an early intervention response. This is being piloted in our Child Sexual Abuse hubs, and includes the promotion of tools such as the Brook traffic light tool which allows school staff to better understand and manage risk by setting out a sliding scale of harm. At the 'normal' end schools can be supported to build capacity to support healthy learning and development without over-estimating risk, while on the other end have in place appropriate safeguarding measures where children and young people are at risk of harm. This approach should involve and be led by the students themselves, and focus on initiatives such as anonymous surveys and participatory sessions where children and young people have the opportunity to state where they have concerns and offer up solutions.

5.4. Schools should set out policies which support them to respond positively and constructively when serious incidents do occur. Evidence from ChildLine, for instance, suggests that the first step for many schools upon becoming aware of the sharing of sexual images is to contact parents, leaving children even further isolated. Many schools do not have appropriate processes to support children returning to school following a serious incident, with schools often failing to recognise that the reach of social media and texting means that being away from the premises does not necessarily put children out of range of abuse. As such schools need to be assured that teachers have the skills and confidence to take disclosures and know where to signpost when harmful behaviour is recognised. Furthermore schools should seek to not just punish harmful behaviour and/or remove children (both in terms of perpetrators and victims), but assess what changes to the school culture and physical environment could be made to prevent incidents occurring again. As research by Dr Carlene Firmin has identified , schools have a tendency to focus on the individual and their family when incidents occur without properly assessing their own role in managing risk and preventing harm. Schools should also consider the role of bystanders and the wider student body's role in allowing abuse and harassment to occur, and consider approaches which help build the skills and confidence of pupils to challenge harmful behaviour when they see it, and be alive to the harm felt by victims subjected to name calling.

5.5. The way schools are designed and the management of space also has an important bearing on student safety and wellbeing. Evidence has shown that crime and anti-social behaviour is often opportunistic. Schools should therefore seek to identify and map areas where harmful sexual behaviour might occur out of sight of school staff, for instance the fringes of the playground, toilets, and corridors between classes. Evidence from the United States has found that while schools and policy makers put it low down as a priority, many students actually saw modifications to the school environment as an important preventative factor. As such schools should also consider student led campaigns such as school-wide poster campaigns.

6. Can schools tackle this problem individually or is national action needed to reduce levels of harassment

6.1. Action is needed by the Government and individual schools and academy chains, with clear leadership from heads, school staff, the third sector, Ministers and civil servants alike. The Government has already outlined a partnership approach with schools to tackle homophobic/transphobic bullying, set out an action plan for PSHE and indicated funding for PSHE materials, and the single point of contact in CAMHS pilots led by the Schools Minister. This strategic approach should be applied to the issue of tackling harmful sexual behaviour, with the Government supporting and incentivising schools and academy chains to adapt policies to incorporate the practical steps needed to encourage the development of a positive school culture and keep children safe. This should start with recognition in the Keeping Children Safe in Education Guidance of the spectrum of sexual behaviour highlighted in paragraph 6.3 of this response.

6.2. The NSPCC has an important role in supporting both the Government and schools. We are currently working with the Department of Education on the five year preventative Keeping Safe education project for schools in Northern Ireland. It is specifically aimed at primary school age children and aims to teach age appropriate messages to keep them safe from bullying, neglect, physical, emotional, domestic as well as sexual abuse. The programme includes the development of a suite of learning and teaching resources to assist school staff to incorporate the teaching of sensitive messages through the both the formal (lessons, assemblies) and informal curriculum (i.e. daily interactions and language). We are also piloting through new Child Sexual Abuse hubs across the country primary prevention work with schools to ensure better, more consistent training to the education workforce.

6.3. Though the Government has taken steps forward by setting out in the Education Excellence Everywhere white paper a joint action plan for PSHE with schools, there is still no concrete incentive for schools to adopt wide reaching PSHE based learning initiatives. Making PSHE mandatory would have the important knock-on effect of putting PSHE on parity with other subjects, giving greater onus for schools to invest in training for staff and purchase high quality resources to guarantee better outcomes for children. The Government can send an important signal by legislating for PSHE in the upcoming Education for All Bill outlined in the Queen's Speech. The Government should also seek to incentivise new academies by modifying the Model Funding Agreement to include a PSHE requirement as a guarantee for funding.

6.4. Learning and solutions must also directly come from children. We are working directly with young people in Wales on the Agenda project where adolescents are leading on developing solutions

addressing many of the concerns we have raised throughout this response. This approach should directly feed into the Government's proposed action plan for PSHE outlined in the education white paper Educational Excellence Everywhere.

6.5. The Government should also seek to incorporate learning from other parts of the UK. The Welsh Government has also taken action in conjunction with Women's Aid to encourage schools to develop whole education approaches by publishing a good practice guide which sets out nine key principles to help tackle violence against women and gender violence. Similar good practice guidance is needed across England, especially in light of proposals to extend the academy programme, in order to ensure consistency amongst a diverse constituency of schools across the country.

6.6. The Government should also seek to build and disseminate learning from the international evidence base. School based behavioural change programmes such as Safe Dates and Shifting Boundaries, and approaches focussed on bystanders and the wider student body such as Bringing in the Bystander and Green Dot . These programmes offer good insight to guide school policies on aspects such as modifying the built environment to prevent abuse, and the kinds of approaches which best lead to behavioural change among the student body and a more respectful, healthy dynamic among pupils. The Government must consider how these and similar initiatives could be adapted to the UK context.

6.7. The Government can also support schools to ensure that staff are equipped with the skills and confidence to meet the needs of victims. The named CAMHS single point of contact outlined in the Schools Minister's proposals to expand the single point of contact pilots must be directed to receive specialist training around harmful sexual behaviour in schools. The designated lead in schools must also ensure that they receive regular training focussed on identifying and responding to harmful sexual behaviour.

7. What can schools do to support students to deal better with the online element of this problem?

7.1. The internet has a huge bearing on how children interact with one another. Schools should therefore have policies in place which address how technology such as social media can be used to perpetrate abuse both inside school and outside in the wider community. As such the Government should ensure online and digital safety needs have a place in the school curriculum as part of wider efforts to develop a whole school ethos focussed on increasing young people's awareness and understanding of the motivations, consequences and risks of some online behaviour. Schools need to ensure that children and young people are able to recognise abusive, coercive and exploitative online behaviour, and understand what constitutes inappropriate behaviour and relationships online. Children also need guidance on blocking unwanted sexual approaches, not being drawn in by manipulative behaviours, understanding what coercive and controlling behaviour can look like online, and know where to report suspicious activity and access support.

7.2. Schools need to have clear reporting mechanisms for on and off-line abuse that have clearly signposted support services (both in school and outside of school) – that are developed with young people, parents and teachers. This includes a clear understanding of how images can be reported and removed from the internet. Teachers also need to be provided with guidance and resources on the different manifestations of online abuse so that they can better educate, support and guide

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children. Teachers need to have concrete risk assessments so as to be able to spot signs of online abuse, escalate and report cases appropriately and know how to signpost and support each child taking into consideration the additional impacts that online abuse has on the child.

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8. Recommendations

8.1. Based on our evidence and findings, the NSPCC proposes the following recommendations aimed at Government and individual schools and academy chains:

	National	Schools and academy chains
Recognition and prioritisation	• The Government must ensure that Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance references harmful sexual behaviour. • The Government must go further than its proposed action plan for PSHE and ensure that any upcoming Schools Bill includes provision to make PSHE mandatory. • The Government must modify the Model Funding Agreement for new academies to stipulate that time and resources be devoted to the provision of PSHE. • The Government should seek as a priority the voices of children and young people in the design and delivery of its PSHE Action Plan, and incorporate their expertise and concerns as its basis. • The Government should borrow the Welsh Government's approach and produce with sector partners a good practice guide setting out the principles of a whole school approach	• Broader school policy should reflect that the sexual behaviour of children sits on a spectrum and recognise normal behaviour from other inappropriate, abusive and violent categories. • Schools must ensure that students are routinely consulted on issues with anonymous question boxes and surveys in order to identify live or persistent issues, and tailor the teaching of PSHE around these issues.
Training and support	• The named CAMHS single point of contact outlined in the Minister for Education's expansion of the single point of contact pilots should be directed to receive specialist training around harmful sexual behaviour in schools.	• Schools must incorporate training for all school staff to ensure they can recognise signs of harmful sexual behaviour and abuse. • Designated Safeguarding leads must develop specific protocols around harmful sexual behaviour and abuse,
Designing and managing space	• The importance of good design should be reflected in the standards for school premises guidance.	• Schools should explore the potential of situational preventative methods as part of their wider safeguarding policy in order to prevent abuse in spaces such as corridors between lessons,

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		toilets, and the playground.
Online	• The Keeping Children Safe guidance must be expanded to include sections on the different manifestations of online abuse. • The Government must direct schools in its upcoming sexting guidance to develop online safety polices.	• Schools must have polices which set out clear reporting mechanisms for online abuse and harassment.

About the NSPCC

The NSPCC fights to end child abuse in the UK by helping children who have been abused to rebuild their lives, protecting children at risk, and finding the best ways of preventing child abuse from happening. We achieve this through a combination of service provision, campaigning and public education.

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