

Peer on Peer Abuse in Schools – Ofsted report - Q&As for forces

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Statement

National Police Chiefs’ Council Lead for Child Abuse and Investigation, Chief Constable Simon Bailey said,

“I welcome the findings from the Ofsted report and the Department for Education’s pledge of further support for schools and colleges in relation to sexual abuse within an educational setting.

“It is evident from the hundreds of calls to the dedicated NSPCC helpline that support is required by victims and survivors, some of whom have suffered sexual abuse within educational settings, and therefore it is encouraging that the helpline is being extended until October 2021.

“It is deeply concerning that Ofsted found that such unacceptable behaviours were not the exception, but instead young people have told us that this is a part of their daily lives. For this reason, we can assume that the testimonies on the Everyone’s Invited website reflect only the tip of the iceberg. The clear message to young people now is – this is not a normal or acceptable part of growing up. There will be no normalising of such unacceptable behaviours, and as a society we all have a part to play – as parents, professionals, and responsible adults – to work together to prevent such behaviour through education, awareness raising, support, and, where appropriate, through enforcement in those instances where serious criminal offences are committed.

“Policing is committed to the continued work with local safeguarding partnerships to educate, inform, intervene where required, and most importantly, work to prevent future harm from taking place.

“We would encourage anyone that has been sexually abused to call the dedicated helpline and/or report their abuse to the police so we can ensure the right safeguarding measures are in place.

“If victims do wish to report criminal offences to the police, they can be confident that their account will be recorded, they will be treated with compassion and respect with

an impartial and proportionate investigation commenced to identify any evidence, regardless of when or where the offence is said to have taken place.”

Note to editors:

The NSPCC Abuse in Education Helpline has received 426 contacts since opening on 1 April 2021. Of these, and up to and including 7 June 2021, a total of 52 agency referrals have been sent to Operation Hydrant from the dedicated helpline.

A force breakdown of referrals will not be provided at this stage.

Statistics

How many referrals has Operation Hydrant received from the NSPCC?

Between 1 April 2021 and 7 June 2021, a total of 52 agency referrals have been sent to Operation Hydrant from the NSPCC Abuse in Education Helpline.

How many ongoing police investigations are there regarding peer-on-peer abuse?

It is too early to ascertain how many police investigations are being undertaken in regards to peer-on-peer abuse in educational settings.

The Everyone’s Invited website community is 45,000 plus strong, with more than 16,500 testimonies. The number of calls to the helpline, by proportion is small. Policing knows, and this is supported by research, that it can take some time, often years, for victims of sexual abuse to speak out, and some never do.

However, victims can be confident that if they do wish to report criminal offences to the police, their account will be recorded and an impartial and proportionate investigation commenced to identify any evidence, regardless of when or where the offence is said to have taken place. This may lead to a criminal justice path, or it may not.

Victim confidence

Do you think this is because there is less victim confidence?

Nationally, we are still seeing reports of non-recent child sexual abuse continuing to increase, which is due to more victims and survivors having the confidence to come forward.

We know that sexual offences continue to be under-reported and we are committed to bringing those who are responsible to justice, regardless of how long ago the offence may have occurred.

Each week, trials take place in court which relate to non-recent allegations of sexual abuse, and offenders are brought to justice, sometimes many years after the offences occurred.

Scale of abuse

Chief Constable Simon Bailey stated that these testimonies were the “tip of the iceberg” and this was the “next biggest child sexual abuse scandal” – given the level of calls to the helpline, do you still believe this?

It is evident from the significant number of testimonies on the Everyone’s Invited website that this is a deep-rooted societal issue, which is very concerning.

The Everyone’s Invited website community is 45,000 plus strong, with over 16,500 testimonies. The number of calls to the helpline, by proportion is small. Policing knows, and this is supported by research, that it can take some time, often years, for victims of sexual abuse to speak out, and some never do.

We understand that for some young people, submitting a testimony to the website is enough; however, we would encourage anyone that has been sexually abused to call the dedicated helpline and/or report their abuse to the police so we can ensure the right safeguarding measures are in place and an investigation is launched, if appropriate. The most important message to those young people impacted by the behaviours detailed in the Everyone’s Invited website testimonies, is that they reach out to a trusted adult, whoever that is, to ensure they receive the right advice and support.

So, how big a problem do you estimate this to be?

The significant number of testimonies on the Everyone’s Invited website is deeply concerning. This may be only the tip of the iceberg – we cannot know.

We welcome the Ofsted review which may add context to the emerging situation, and would urge those impacted to reach out for support or advice, either via the dedicated NSPCC helpline - **0800 136 663**, or by whatever means are best for them. The very act of reaching out in itself can help to build visibility of the scale and trends, even without the victim wishing to be identified.

Is there any evidence to suggest educational establishments have covered this type of abuse up to protect their reputation?

Any concerns focused around a particular institution will be addressed through the Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships.

Such partnerships play an important role in early interventions / prevention and education, as well as dealing with reported incidents – determining the best approach for that specific set of circumstances. Most important is a co-ordinated approach across all agencies to ensure that the partnership is working effectively to meet young people’s needs.

Operation Hydrant

Why does peer-on-peer abuse fall under the Operation Hydrant remit?

Operation Hydrant has established an effective model for providing operational coordination across policing on issues which have national reach, and are likely to impact a significant number, or all, UK police forces simultaneously.

For this reason, Operation Hydrant is coordinating the national policing response to these issues. They are the single point of contact for policing for the NSPCC helpline and receive referrals from them, they are interfacing with the DfE and Home Office as part of the cross government response and they are providing advice to forces to ensure an effective and consistent policing approach is being taken.

What happens when the NSPCC refers a call to Operation Hydrant?

Once a referral is received from the NSPCC into the Operation Hydrant Safeguarding and Referral Team, it is triaged to determine if there is an urgent safeguarding risk requiring immediate action.

Following this assessment, referrals are passed to the force local to the allegations who then consider what action is necessary, in terms of safeguarding, recording, or investigation. The force will then take ownership of any criminal investigation which may follow.

Victims can be confident that if they do wish to report criminal offences to the police, their account will be recorded and an impartial and proportionate investigation commenced to identify any evidence, regardless of when or where the offence is said to have taken place. This may lead to a criminal justice path, or it may not.

Victims should also be confident that their views matter, and will influence what action is taken.

Reporting abuse

Will all calls to the NSPCC be referred to the police?

No. Young people can be reassured that if they do wish to report abuse to the dedicated NSPCC helpline, that their views and wishes will always be listened to.

In some circumstances, a safeguarding response or education will be the most appropriate - the NSPCC call takers are experts in this subject matter and will provide victims and survivors with support and guidance.

If victims do wish to report to police, they can be confident that their account will be recorded, and an impartial and proportionate investigation commenced to identify any evidence, regardless of when or where the offence is said to have taken place. This may lead to a criminal justice path, or it may not.

What if I want to report offences to the police, but do not want to go to court?

We understand that for some, a criminal justice outcome is not the right path and that reporting the abuse to officers is enough. The views and wishes of victims and survivors are always listened to.

Victims can be confident that if they do wish to report criminal offences to the police, their account will be recorded, and an impartial and proportionate investigation commenced to identify any evidence, regardless of when or where the offence is said to have taken place. This may lead to a criminal justice path, or it may not.

This [short animated video](#) explains what happens next when a sexual offence is reported to the police. This animation is designed to help inform decision making of victims and survivors of child abuse.

I know of someone that has been abused at school – should I call the NSPCC helpline to report this?

Anyone who has concerns about crimes being committed should report to the police. This enables the police to prevent further harm to the victim or others.

What should parents do if they have concerns?

Parents should speak to their child/children's school or educational establishment if they have concerns about peer on peer abuse.

We would encourage anyone who has concerns about crimes being committed to report to the police. This enables the police to prevent further harm to the victim or others.

Chief Constable Simon Bailey said that mothers should report sons – is this what policing advocates?

Parents should speak to their child/children's school or educational establishment if they have concerns about peer on peer abuse.

We would encourage anyone who has concerns about crimes being committed to report to the police. This enables the police to prevent further harm to the victim or others.

I am being accused of peer-on-peer abuse – what should I do?

If you are being accused of offences, we would encourage you to speak to a parent/carer as well as the school about the alleged allegations.

I was complicit in some of these behaviours when I was in school – my life has moved on now, will I be arrested?

If you have concerns regarding situations or behaviours which have taken place, it is important that you speak to someone and take advice.

It is important to note that the range of behaviours forming the testimonies on the website Everyone's Invited is wide, and includes inappropriate behaviour at one end of the spectrum, through potentially to serious sexual offences at the other. Not all testimonies would suggest that a law enforcement intervention is the right approach.

However, where there is a suggestion or evidence of an individual committing harm, and continuing to pose a risk to others, the police will take appropriate and positive action.

If I tell my school, will they tell the police?

There is clear guidance for teachers and school staff in regards to recognising vulnerabilities and safeguarding issues.

If a member of school staff is told of an offence that has taken place either on school premises or outside, they have a responsibility to report the allegations in order to safeguard pupils.

I tried to report my abuse previously to police, but I wasn't listened to – how confident can I be that if I report again, it will be dealt with appropriately?

The policing approach to investigating allegations of sexual abuse has evolved considerably in recent years. It is fair to say that policing has made mistakes in the past in relation to victims of sexual abuse. However, we have learned from those mistakes, and the approach today is very different.

Now, victims can be confident that if they do wish to report criminal offences to the police, their account will be recorded, they will be treated seriously and with empathy and an impartial and proportionate investigation commenced to identify any evidence, regardless of when or where the offence is said to have taken place. This may lead to a criminal justice path, or it may not.

What about offences happening in homes and communities/parties - or whether policing will limit itself to offences allegedly committed on school premises?

Any report of criminal offences to the police will be recorded, and an impartial and proportionate investigation commenced to identify any evidence, regardless of when or where the offence is said to have taken place. This may lead to a criminal justice path, or it may not.

It is important to note that there is not an intention for policing to criminalise young people – testimonies range from inappropriate behaviours to serious sexual offences – it is the latter that could prompt a criminal investigation.

Young people should be reassured that if they wish to contact the NSPCC helpline, their call won't be automatically referred to police without their consent. Instead, they may be signposted to other pathways for advice, support, and reassurance.

How far back will you investigate allegations?

Police take all allegations of sexual abuse seriously, no matter how long ago the allegations relate to. Any report of a crime to the police is listened to, recorded, and an impartial and proportionate investigation launched to identify any relevant evidence. This process is followed whether the alleged offences took place last week, last year, or many years ago.

Each week, trials take place in court which relate to non-recent allegations of sexual abuse, and offenders are brought to justice, sometimes many years after the offences occurred.

Why is it important to identify offenders if they continue to offend later in life at Universities?

Referrals into Operation Hydrant suggest that many referrals received are assessed as showing a potential current live safeguarding risk.

Safeguarding the vulnerable, preventing further victims, and preventing abusers from continuing to harm remains central to the work of policing.

It is important to note that the range of behaviours forming the testimonies on the website Everyone's Invited is wide, and includes inappropriate behaviour at one end of the spectrum, through potentially to serious sexual offences at the other. Not all testimonies would suggest that a law enforcement intervention is the right approach.

However, where there is a suggestion or evidence of an individual committing harm, and continuing to pose a risk to others, the police will take appropriate and positive action.

What are the challenges of investigating peer-on-peer allegations when offences might happen in friendship groups/parties that involve alcohol?

It is important to note that the range of behaviours forming the testimonies on the website Everyone's Invited is wide, and includes inappropriate behaviour at one end of the spectrum, through potentially to serious sexual offences at the other. Not all testimonies would suggest that a law enforcement intervention is the right approach.

However, where there is a suggestion or evidence of an individual committing harm, and continuing to pose a risk to others, the police will take appropriate and positive action.

We understand that young people may have concerns if offences have happened at a house party during Covid restrictions on gatherings, or while someone under the legal age has drunk alcohol, for example. Safeguarding, and removing or reducing risk of vulnerability, will always be the priority – and young people should trust in this.

It is also important to emphasise that policing is just one element of Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships, and such partnerships work together to ensure the right approach which is informed across organisational boundaries – so policing's role is

not restricted to one of enforcement, and it may in fact be more appropriate for another agency to lead on the response required, depending on circumstances.

Such partnerships play an important role in early interventions / prevention and education, as well as dealing with reported incidents – determining the best approach for that specific set of circumstances. Most important is a co-ordinated approach across all agencies to ensure that the partnership is working effectively to meet the young person's needs.

We also need to work to build trust and confidence of young people in reaching out to a trusted adult for advice, signposting, and support.

How do officers establish whether the offences being reported are true or have been fabricated?

Often allegations of sexual offences, by their very nature, are one word against another. However, officers are skilled in exploring all possible avenues which may result in evidence relating to the allegations made.

In contemporary cases, this may include forensic evidence. In non-recent cases, this may include evidence of a different kind. Many forces now have specialist teams set up who are skilled in investigating such allegations.

Most importantly, any victim contacting the police to report a crime should know that they will be listened to, believed and treated with empathy, and their allegations recorded.

Those accused should know that investigations are impartial, without fear or favour, and will seek to identify all possible evidence, whether it supports the allegations or otherwise.

Police resources

What resources does policing have available and in what circumstances do you want to hear from young people and children?

The police would wish to hear from anyone who wants to report a crime, or offer information about a crime.

We appreciate that not all young people would feel confident in contacting the police – but the most important thing is that young people reach out to a trusted adult if they feel threatened or harmed, or know someone who feels that way.

Every day policing responds to many, many incidents and reports of crime. We prioritise our resources based on an assessment of risk and harm. Safeguarding the vulnerable from harm will always be a priority.

It is important to highlight also that in addition to criminal investigations, policing also has an active and significant role in preventing harm before it occurs, and works with local partners to raise awareness, educate, and inform. Safeguarding is a golden

thread running through all policing activity, and action to remove or mitigate vulnerability is also undertaken.

Policing is also keen to ensure that those impacted by the testimonies emerging are signposted to support and advice which is appropriate to them, and work with stakeholders and partners to ensure that this signposting is visible and accessible.

What is the policing position on mandatory reporting?

Mandatory reporting of sexual offences in schools doesn't currently exist; however, there is clear guidance for teachers and school staff in regards to recognising vulnerabilities and safeguarding issues.

If a member of school staff is told of an offence that has taken place either on school premises or outside, they have a responsibility to report the allegations in order to safeguard pupils.