# POLICING HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN SCHOOLS

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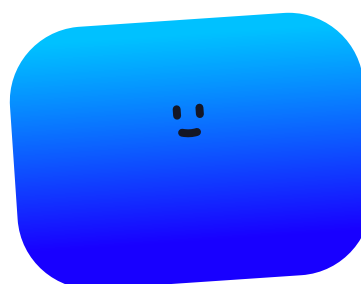
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## Acknowledgements

# INTRODUCTION

This guidance has been produced to inform policy and practice for tackling 'harmful sexual behaviour' (HSB) among young people in schools. It focuses on the policing of HSB, specifically the relationship between police and schools and the role of police in schools and in partnership with schools in preventing and responding to HSB.

## What is harmful sexual behaviour among young people?

A range (or continuum – see part 1) of unwanted, harassing and abusive sexual and sexualised acts and experiences enacted by individual or groups of young people toward other individuals or groups. It may be verbal, physical, direct or indirect and may take place online or offline. It may be recognised, experienced and/or responded to as harmful or it may involve normalised patterns of behaviour that while potentially harmful, may not always be recognised or responded to as such. Examples include: sexualised comments, unwanted touching, forced or coerced sexual activity, sharing of unwanted explicit imagery online.

The guidance is based on research conducted in Surrey, England, in partnership with Surrey Police. The research involved interviews with police officers and analysis of police incident data pertaining to HSB among young people, alongside interviews in schools with teachers and with statutory and non-statutory service providers (including youth work and therapeutic practitioners), managers and policy makers.

To ensure general applicability across organisational contexts, the guidance incorporates the research team's existing insights and expertise pertaining to HSB among young people, a review of wider literature on the topic, and input from an advisory group spanning academic and non-academic experts in the field.

While there was limited engagement with young people as part of the primary research, young people's perspectives are further addressed through incorporating insights from the project team's direct work with young people, wider literature and expertise of the advisory group.

## What will you find in the guidance?

The guidance comprises six main sections:

1. **Defining harmful sexual behaviour.**

2. **Explaining harmful sexual behaviour.**

3. **Conceptualising harmful sexual behaviour and un/healthy relationships among young people.**

4. **Preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour – Current practice.**

5. **Recommendations for policy and practice through police-school partnerships.**

6. **Case studies to support training and professional development for police-school partnerships.**

The sections address HSB as occurs in intersecting online and offline domains, both within and outside schools but where ramifications play out with school contexts and thus require partnership working between police, schools, and other statutory and non-statutory service providers. In section 3, there is a framework presented for conceptualising and responding to HSB as a cultural phenomenon, foregrounding inclusive sexual citizenship and trauma-informed, gender- and sexuality-sensitive prevention and response. Section 4 sets out perspectives on current policy and practice shared by participants, with section 5 outlining our recommendations for policy and practice development. Section 6 presents case examples that can be used as a resource for training and professional development.

# What is the aim of the guidance?

The guidance has been designed for police, schools and the wider children's workforce to, through partnership working:

· Reflect upon and refine their key objectives pertaining to the prevention and response to HSB.

· Identify and ameliorate any unintended and undesired consequences of prevention and response actions.

· Develop ways of partnership working that support effective prevention and response, including regarding the causes, contexts and consequences of HSB among and for young people.

· Promote the protection, provision and participation rights of young people vis-à-vis sex and relationships.

The guidance has been designed with an overarching aim of enabling and supporting young people to have and experience positive and healthy peer relationships and to develop and practice healthy, ethical and responsible 'sexual citizenship' (see York, MacKenzie and Purdy (2021). It is intended to support policy makers and practitioners to go beyond dominant risk, harm and deficit models of young people's relationships and sexual development and behaviours, and to address harm reduction and prevention through positive rights as well as negative (protection) rights.

> By sexual citizenship, we refer to the knowledge and socio-emotional skills and literacy that young people need to understand and uphold their own and one another's rights regarding sex and relationships. It is through practicing and developing sexual citizenship – both under the guidance of adults and, as appropriate, independently within their peer contexts and interpersonal relationships – that young people can actively address the cultures of HSB that affect them and their peers and, in turn, reduce the prevalence of incidents of HSB through tackling the root causes of the problem. Not only does it help to reduce HSB, it also equips young people to have positive, healthy and ethical relationships and experiences.
>
> (York et al., 2021)

# Who is this guidance for?

This guidance has been designed primarily for the police and schools as partners in responding to and tackling HSB among young people. It is also of relevance to other members of the statutory and non-statutory children's workforce. It is for policy makers, on the ground practitioners, and school and police leaders, with recommendations for national and local policy and practice.

While developed predominantly based on the perspectives of stakeholders in Surrey, England, the guidance is intended to be of relevance in other contexts both nationally and internationally. However, the guidance has been designed in response to realities and concerns affecting England and so will need to be adapted for application and use in other jurisdictions. It should also be borne in mind that while the guidance is intended to be flexible for use in various school and policing contexts, it is not necessarily fully inclusive of all variation within and between young people, schools and police as pertains to the prevention of and response to HSB.

# How should the guidance be used?

Before the main sections, an executive summary can be found which outlines the key takeaways from each section. It is recommended that readers consult the rest of this introduction, the executive summary and sections 5 and 6 in full, with those interested in understanding the underpinning evidence and rationale free to consult the relevant full sections.

The guidance is provided free of charge and can be adapted and applied for use by individuals and organisations as they see fit. It is intended to supplement, not supplant, statutory policy for schools, police and other services, with the view to aid policy development across education and policing domains and enactment of policy through practice in youth-facing settings and services.

This guidance should be read alongside:

- Prevention and tackling bullying: Advice for schools (DfE 2017)

- Working together to safeguard children (DfE, 2018)

- Statutory guidance on Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education for schools in England (DfE, 2019)

- Sexual harassment and sexual violence between children in schools and colleges (DfE, 2021)

- Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy (Home Office, 2021)

- Keeping children safe in education (DfE, 2023)

- Behaviour in schools: Advice for head teachers and school staff (DfE, 2022)

- Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England, including pupil movement: Guidance for maintained schools, academies, and pupil referral units in England (DfE, 2023)

The guidance can, therefore, be used and applied in full or in part depending on the requirements of stakeholders.

# METHODOLOGY

This guidance has been produced based on primary and secondary research conducted during 2023, comprising:

- Nine interviews with police working across youth engagement, high harm perpetrators and online crime.

- Six interviews with teachers and teaching staff across two schools, including a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and Headteacher in one school; DSL, Deputy Head, Head of PSHE, Head of Pastoral and Receptionist in the second school.

- Eight interviews with statutory and non-statutory service providers spanning Children's Social Care and Targeted Youth Support, as well as representatives from education and public health, an adolescent forensic service, online safety service, and third-sector domestic violence services and intervention providers.

- Quantitative and qualitative analysis of police incident record data, including as pertains to offence categories of HSB involving young people, suspect and complainant characteristics, response and processing timescales, outcomes, and accounts of processes and decision-making, comprising:

  o Quantitative - 2,264 peer-on-peer, extra-familial incidents of HSB involving young people, occurring between 01/01/2015 and 01/06/2023, recorded by Surrey Police (see appendix II).

  o Qualitative - 23 closed cases dealt with between 09/2022 and 09/2023 [no live investigations] selected purposively to cover a range of offence types, constituting approximately 10% of total cases during the period (see appendix III).

- Group interview with seven adolescent girls in one school exploring perspectives on HSB, specifically regarding reflections on their experiences undertaking a healthy relationships programme in school.

- Paired interview with Domestic Abuse Ambassadors (young people) in the above school.

- Non-systematic literature review of the nature, causes, prevention and response to HSB among young people, including incorporation of the research team's existing knowledge and practice regarding HSB and young people.

A draft version of the guidance was shared with an advisory group of academic and non-academic experts in the field, with insights from this group incorporated into the final guidance. As project partner, Surrey Police has also contributed to the final guidance and comments were sought from all participants in the research to ensure accuracy of the presentation of their perspectives.

## How transferable are the findings to police and school contexts?

The data collected and analysed for this project encompasses a range of professional experiences in the field and the kinds of HSB incidents that police, school and other partners are responding to. The data and examples are not necessarily indicative of all perspectives or experiences but, coupled with the existing literature, the research teams' extensive experience in the field and the input from the advisory board, ensures that the guidance is comprehensive, balanced and evidence-based. Importantly, however, the incorporation of youth voice into the development of the guidance was limited in the primary research aspect of this project and is mostly dependent on existing literature and the expertise of the research team and the advisory group.

## How was the data generated and interpreted to develop the recommendations?

The interviews with police, teachers and service providers were designed to facilitate frank and open discussion about their understandings and experiences of dealing with HSB involving young people. Readers should be mindful that analysis involved critical engagement with the data generated, with the aim of supporting stakeholders to reflect on their assumptions about what constitutes HSB and how best to prevent and respond to it. This included attention to the concerns expressed by participants, with recommendations developed to address these concerns in ways that align with the wider evidence base. Interpretations and conclusions drawn based on the analysis have been cross-checked within the research team and with the advisory group, Surrey police and research participants.

## Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in line with professional ethical principles for research with human participants regarding informed consent, anonymity, and safeguarding and received institutional ethics approval from the University of Surrey.

Incident data analysed from Surrey Police was shared and handled securely in accordance with GDPR-compliant data sharing arrangements.

All participants' identities have been kept anonymous. However, because the study was undertaken in partnership with Surrey Police and data collection primarily took place in Surrey, research participants were advised as to the limits on anonymity regarding occupational role and place of work. While this guidance does not include any personal identifying details, participants were informed that the partnership with Surrey Police would be published and, therefore, consented to share perspectives and experiences in interviews based on this awareness that their location of work would be known to readers.

## Terminology and framing of harmful sexual behaviour among young people

The language of 'harmful sexual behaviour' was originally used to describe sexually inappropriate behaviours of individuals in a specific context such as a child touching their genitals, self-soothing in class, or incidents of child sexual abuse, including direct contact offences where the abuse is carried out by another child. With the example of self-soothing, it should be noted that it is not the act of self-stimulation itself that is deemed harmful, but the context, as it is a behaviour deemed inappropriate by society and could make other children (and adults) uncomfortable. Since the 1990s, studies have shown that children and young people commit sexual abuse against other children (Allardyce and Yates, 2018; Erooga and Mason, 2006; Hackett, et al., 2016; Vizard et al., 2007). Typically, it is estimated that children and young people account for a quarter of all convictions and between a third and half of all contact offences against under 18s, which is not always acknowledged when professionals conceptualise child sexual abuse. A recent analysis of police recorded crime suggests that child-on-child abuse accounts for around half of all incidents of child sexual abuse (VKPP, 2024).

HSB involving young people may take place within the family or outside of the family Participants variably referred to familial and/or extra-familial HSB, with some suggestion by participants that perspectives on what constitutes HSB and who is involved are shaped by professional working contexts. This guidance specifically focuses on extra-familial HSB among and experienced by young people rather than abuse within the family. However, it is noted that there remains a question about how schools and police can work effectively as partners in preventing and responding to familial HSB among young people and, moreover, that young people involved in familial HSB may also be involved in extra-familial HSB, so these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories when considering young people's risks and needs.

While 'harmful sexual behaviour' has been used as a term the guidance, it is noted that the behaviour may be 'harmful' or 'inappropriate' to individual young people and/or others, but may not necessarily always be *abnormal* if considered in light of their socio-sexual stage of development or, perhaps, the social and cultural norms that impact the behaviour. Likewise, young people may not engage or be involved in HSB

with malicious intent, but rather because it is socially or culturally normative or rewarded. Their behaviours may be *sexualised* in ways that require addressing but any preventative or response action should be taken with the aim of helping young people identify *why* certain behaviours may cause harm or be otherwise inappropriate and, in turn, to develop and make changes in a positive direction for themselves and others.

The guidance purposely does not use terms such as 'perpetrator', 'victim', 'suspect' or 'complainant.' Instead, young people are referred to as being 'involved' in enacting HSB or as acting in a harmful manner and as being 'affected' by or as 'experiencing' HSB. Given they are young, there is limited benefit, and indeed potential detriment, to unduly labelling them with potentially stigmatising categorical terminology such as 'perpetrator'. Avoiding such terminology also enables recognition of the ways that young people may experience, be affected by and/or involved in HSB in dynamic and fluid ways that mean that an individual may not solely be a 'perpetrator' or 'victim' across time, place or context. These labels can create connotations of otherness, serving to make it easier for the 'adultification' (see section 2) of young people and, resultantly, the removal of their rights, including to safeguarding, to occur. Instead, there can be blurred boundaries between such categories, while vulnerabilities and safeguarding needs may be present for any of those involved in, experiencing or affected by HSB.

## Harmful sexual behaviour as a form of Violence Against Women and Girls

The guidance been produced with the support of ESRC funding under its 2022 VAWG scheme. The purpose of this scheme is to support partnership projects between universities and police "to help police constabularies and other relevant stakeholders tackle specific challenges linked to VAWG. This includes all acts of violence, abuse, crimes and behaviours that disproportionately affect women and girls" (ESRC, 2022).

The gendered nature of HSB in schools was illustrated by the 'Everyone's Invited' movement, created by Soma Sara in 2020, whereby young people submitted testimonials about HSB that they had experienced or witnessed to an Instagram page and website, with girls submitting most of the testimonials about HSB that they had experienced or witnessed carried out by boys. A 'rapid response' report subsequently published by Ofsted in May 2021, identified a significant gendered patterning to experiences of HSB among young people in schools and colleges across England (Ofsted, 2021). Ofsted's findings confirmed what had already been found by the Women's and Equalities Committee in its 2015/2016 investigation of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in schools in England (Women's and Equalities Committee, 2016).

While understood as a form of VAWG, the guidance broadly addresses HSB as sexual- and gender-based violence and harassment to capture the nuanced ways that sexuality and gender intersect with experiences of and involvement in HSB among young people. This means that the guidance goes beyond reified framings of risk, vulnerability and power among young people and outlines how HSB is shaped in complex and multifaceted ways by sexuality and gender. For example:

· Girls and young women may experience shame connected to HSB, in line with normative stigmas that shape expectations and interpretations of acceptable femininity and sexual behaviour and responsibility for HSB. For example, in cases where a girl's intimate images are shared without consent, she may face 'slut shaming' and taunts of being a 'slag' or 'asking for it'.

· Some boys and young men may seek to gain personal and interpersonal reward, status and power within male peer groups through enacting HSB, both as individuals and groups, at the expense of girls and young women, including as part of their adherence to masculine behavioural norms. For example, boys may attempt to take images under girls' skirts (upskirting) and share these with peers 'for a laugh' through exerting heterosexual dominance.

HSB is multifaceted and complex and can be excused in the peer group via enforcing gender norms. For example, when boys are 'debagged' (e.g., have their jogging bottoms pulled down to expose their underwear or genitals to shame/embarrass), it may be interpreted as 'only banter' or 'a laugh' and is not deemed sexual in nature, despite exerting a form of sexualised body shaming.

An appreciation of these various dynamics enables the identification and response to HSB between young people of all genders and sexualities. HSB may unfold differently across cultural, social, interpersonal and personal domains depending on the factors and contexts at play. This guidance has been designed to support policy and practice to capture this nuance and to take a holistic, constructive, restorative, inclusive and rights-based approach to addressing the problem of HSB with and for young people.

Gender and sexual minority and diverse young people encompass individuals whose gender identity, expression and/or sexual orientation may differ from societal norms or expectations and encompassing those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Bragg et al., 2018; Storr et al., 2022) and those who otherwise do not (or are perceived to not) conform with gender and sexual norms and expectations.

National and international research highlights the marginalisation of gender and sexuality diverse subjectivities in school, including as enacted through verbal and physical harassment of diverse and gender non-conforming young people (Ullman, 2022). It is important to consider gender and sexuality, alongside other factors and circumstances, when trying to understand and tackle HSB among young people, because gender- and sexuality-related norms and inequalities can contribute to vulnerabilities for experiencing and enacting HSB. Exploring these matters is important for developing effective interventions, support and prevention strategies that address the contexts of HSB and the needs of all young people.

**What is the Everyone's Invited' movement?**

The Everyone's Invited movement was initiated by Soma Sara, who created the Everyone's Invited website and Instagram page as a platform for survivors to share their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse. It began as a social media campaign encouraging individuals to speak out about their experiences, with the aim of raising awareness and generating conversations around these issues.

The movement gained significant attention through its social media presence and testimonies, highlighting a wide range of experiences from sexual harassment to assault, both online and in-person. It raised awareness about the prevalence and normalisation of such behaviours and experiences, including within educational institutions. Subsequent discussion has focused on gender disparities in experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, issues surrounding consent and healthy relationships, and the problems with the nature of institutional responses to young people's experiences of and involvement in the behaviours. The movement has inspired discussion about the systemic changes required within institutions and society.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Section 1: Defining Harmful Sexual Behaviour

**Young people's sexual behaviour ranges along a continuum:** The continuum includes developmentally normative and beneficial sexual behaviour and relationships but then also harmful behaviours of varying levels of seriousness and illegality.

**Not all harmful sexual behaviour is clearly illegal:** Some acts may be problematic but not necessarily illegal, while the legal status of some HSB may be ambiguous.

**HSB takes place online and offline, by and toward individuals and groups:** It may take place inside or outside of school and may be direct, indirect, physical, verbal or written. Regardless of where and in want format it takes place, it has ramifications for young people's school and peer cultures and their personal and interpersonal socio-sexual development and experiences.

**The law may not adequately capture or be able to respond to all forms of HSB:** This includes acts of ambiguous legal status or that are not illegal, and as relates to the complexities of investigation and response to incidents.

**Consent is a potentially defining, or highly relevant, part of HSB:** Some forms of HSB are non-consensual by definition (e.g., rape, sexual assault), while other forms of HSB may be normalised – so not explicitly non-consensual – but unwanted and harmful. The presence or absence of consent in some incidents (e.g., gender and sexual shaming or (cyber-)bullying), at least from a legal perspective, may be ambiguous.

**Legal definitions of consent and 'affirmative consent' may not reflect the complexities of how young people and adults determine consent:** Consent communication is typically indirect and non-verbal and there can be significant ambiguity and ambivalence about what is and is not agreed to within sexual interactions by and between those involved and those witnessing or responding to incidents. Consent may be compromised in ways that do not reach a legal threshold but is otherwise problematic.

**Sexual image sharing online among young people is of adult concern:** Adults typically frame young people's involvement in sexual image sharing as inherently risky and irresponsible, with it being considered a key form of contemporary HSB among young people.

**Evidence suggests that young people's perspectives on and experiences of sexual image sharing online are complex:** It may not always be experienced as harmful to them and may sometimes take place in developmentally normative ways without any apparent aggravating factors or adverse consequences and, even, may be beneficial for exploring identities, experiencing intimacy and/or delaying physical sexual activity, at least from their perspective.

**Online image sharing can involve acts of abuse and harassment that should be responded to as HSB:** Image-based sexual abuse and harassment compromises a range of non-consensual acts, such as pressure to produce/share images, sending unwanted images, non-consensual production of images, non-consensual distribution and showing of images, and coercion/blackmail to share images. Young people may lack opportunities to develop a full understanding of the distinctions between consensual and non-consensual online sexual behaviours, as well as the complexities of the social and cultural conditions that may normalise unwanted acts and blame those experiencing them for their occurrence.

**Current legislation is poorly equipped to adequately distinguish between contexts of image sharing among young people and image-based abuse and harassment:** Outdated laws surrounding illicit imagery of minors (designed pre-smartphone era and intended to address adult offending toward children) are used to prohibit all image sharing among young people and preclude a more nuanced discussion around preventing, identifying and responding to risk and non-consensual online sexual behaviours through a harm-reduction approach.

# Section 2: Explaining Harmful Sexual Behaviour

**Professionals differ in their perspectives on the nature and causes of HSB:** Judgments may be based on professional perspectives and experiences and may involve an element of subjectivity or speculation with evidence of 'learning on the job' regarding risks and needs.

**Individual and family related factors deemed to cause or increase the risk of HSB include Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs) and Special Educational Needs (SEN):** These factors may increase the risk of both involvement in and experience of HSB, due to issues related to learnt behaviour, understanding of appropriate behaviour, and so on. Yet, it may also be the case that young people with these factors are more likely to come to the attention of adult authorities and to be referred to services. Importantly, the risks factors relate to and are exacerbated by weaknesses and failures of inadequate systems that create vulnerabilities for young people.

**HSB is also a matter of social and cultural norms, with gender and sexuality shaping perspectives on and experiences of HSB:** Girls and young women are more likely to experience HSB and boys and young men are more likely to enact it as part of heterosexual interactional and relational dynamics. Girls can be implicitly and explicitly blamed – by themselves, other young people and adults – for 'accepting' normalised patterns of HSB and for not sufficiently identifying or acting upon HSB or other unhealthy relationship patterns. Harmful and abusive behaviours enacted by boys and young men can be attributed to essentialised renderings of the 'male sex drive' and their proclivity to seek personal and social reward and capital through HSB.

**The role of gender and sexuality in HSB is complex and should not be reified along taken-for-granted heterosexual gender dynamics:** Boys and young men can also experience HSB – often rooted in gendered and sexualised dynamics of shame and stigma connected to masculine heterosexuality – and girls and young women may enact HSB, but it may not always be recognised or responded to as such. Gender and sexuality diverse young people can also experience HSB, such as homophobic and sexual shaming, harassment and abuse.

**Image-based sexual harassment and abuse (IBSHA) mirrors wider gender and sexual patterns in HSB:** Image-based sexual harassment and abuse (IBSHA) comes under the legal framework of non-consensual image exchange including non-consensual sharing of intimate images/films (so-called 'revenge porn' but note the concerns with this terminology outlined below), non-consensual taking of images/films ('upskirting'/'downblousing') and the sending of images/films without consent ('cyberflashing'). However, there was little up-to-date understanding of these digital sexual offences among the professionals interviewed in this research, who were mainly focused on preventing primary image sharing by young people. Evidence shows that girls and young women can be disproportionately affected, while boys and young men disproportionately involved in ISBAH; yet, boys can also be targeted with abuse and may not always have access to social capital through image sharing within their local peer contexts, so, as above, should not be deemed as inherently likely to enact abuse.

**Prevention and response to HSB may reinforce gendered approaches to understanding HSB that may not capture the nuance of how gender and sexuality inflect HSB online and offline:** Professionals may assume the matter is solely of girls' and young women's vulnerabilities and boys' and young men's proclivities to harm, which ignores the gender and sexual diversity in young people's identities and experiences regarding sex and relationships.

**Minority ethnic young people and sexual minorities may be subject to greater 'adultification' by adults and so may lack access to safeguarding:** These young people may find themselves more likely to be responded to as 'perpetrators', with a potentially increased likelihood of formal action taken against them, while their experiences of HSB may not be recognised or responded to as such.

**The internet, social media and networked communication technologies may create new patterns of HSB (e.g., image sharing online) and may cause HSB:** Social media content may create or exacerbate pressures or demands that shape HSB, while sexual information online can be unreliable and lead to harmful behaviours. Pornography may be part of a tapestry of influence over young people's socio-sexual development, potentially to adverse effect regarding normalised sexual behaviours learnt from pornography.

**Pornography that normalises sexual violence may be influencing young people's socio-sexual development:** The normalisation of HSB in some pornography has generated mass concern. However, there are many forms of pornography, not all are harmful and research indicates that young people are able to discern when pornography is unrealistic and/or endorsing violence. Young people need greater support in managing the adverse effects of HSB learnt from pornography. Some young people may be more vulnerable to be impacted by pornography (including SEN young people and those with pre-existing behavioural issues).

**The role of online content and media is complex and there is limited conclusive evidence on cause and effect (or direction of causation):** It is more likely that the internet and social media intersects with a wider ecosystem of socio-sexual learning and development and may *digitally mediate* HSB but must be situated within a wider context. It should not be assumed that consumption of content online (including pornography) will always result in harmful outcomes. Where it does, it should be considered as a factor alongside other factors in a holistic approach to preventing and responding to HSB.

# Section 3: Conceptualising harmful sexual behaviour and un/healthy relationships among young people.

**Harmful sexual behaviour among young people is a matter of 'culture' not just individual incidents of acts of harm:** The social and cultural norms within young people's peer and school-based contexts and the institutional structures of the school affect whether and how HSB is enacted, defined, interpreted and responded to by both young people and adults.

**Just focusing on incidents of HSB may neglect the wider social and cultural contexts at play or may involve normalisation or fatalism about these contexts:** Any behavioural norms identified as unfolding or becoming entrenched among young people are rooted in how they navigate and negotiate wider systemic and societal dynamics that shape sex, relationships and sexual behaviour.

**Healthy relationships are important to promote when seeking to address HSB but must go beyond just listing virtues or characteristics of such relationships and also focus on skills, attitudes and literacy:** There are various reasons why young people may be able to identify or define a virtue or characteristic as healthy or unhealthy but nevertheless continue to experience unhealthy relationships. The socio-emotional skills and literacy required to have and uphold healthy peer relationships need also to be addressed. There should also be a focus on the barriers and facilitators to healthy relationships as pertain to the norms that may be present within young people's peer contexts and that, in turn, affect their expectations for, attitudes toward and beliefs about sex, relationships and sexual behaviour.

**Inclusive sexual citizenship offers an opportunity to develop young people's knowledge, skills and emotional literacy in ways that enable them to uphold their own and other's rights in positive, healthy and responsible ways:** Rather than young people's relationships and sexual behaviours being seen as inherently irresponsible or harmful, they can claim their rights to agency and autonomy safely as they navigate the transition to adulthood, under the support of adults.

**Trauma-informed response and prevention must address the needs of all those involved in and affected by HSB:** This would involve recognising that those directly involved and affected, as well as the wider peer collective, may have various safeguarding needs.

**Gender and sexuality sensitive prevention and response would involve careful attention to the ways that norms about gender and sexuality inflect young people's experiences of and involvement in HSB:** It would not essentialise about gender and sexuality, nor, in turn, reify expected gendered or heterosexualised behaviours. Instead, it would consider how young people are affected by gender and sexual norms, including gender and sexuality diverse young people, and including as embedded within institutional cultures and perpetuated, including unintentionally, by adults.

# Section 4: Preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour in schools: Current practice.

**Police involvement in preventative education needs to be carefully considered and, if undertaken, embedded within a holistic partnership approach:** Preventative education may be considered the primary domain of teachers in schools as supposed trusted experts. Yet, police have important skills, expertise and credibility to bring, and teachers may not always feel equipped to educate young people about all topics comprehensively. However, topics should not be outsourced to police and should be addressed collaboratively between partners with no expectation that just educating young people about the law will be enough to fully tackle the issue of HSB.

**Young people can find teacher delivered preventative education unhelpful and unengaging, while police can offer credibility:** There are opportunities for police to convey important information to young people and, in turn, to build relationships and trust with young people through early engagement. This can also help police in identifying potentially vulnerable or at-risk young people to support with prevention and early response.

**Police involvement in primary preventative education takes various forms:** The context and style of delivery vary depending on the nature of the issue and whether it is reactive (e.g., education delivered followed an incident) or proactive (e.g., part of the planned curriculum). Assembly-style approaches are unlikely to be sufficiently engaging or supportive around sensitive important issues like HSB, unless ample time and provision is provided after the assembly to allow young people to debrief, unpack, and discuss the issues raised in the presentation in smaller groups.

**Education about gender- and sexual-based violence and VAWG must be holistic and nuanced:** A constructive, inclusive and impactful approach would involve recognising the diversity among young people about how they involved in and affected by HSB, mindful of how gender and sexuality norms affect HSB in complex ways.

**Police may be intimidating to young people and some young people may have pre-existing lack of trust in police and/or previous harmful or otherwise negative experiences with the police:** Police inevitably have both enforcement and support roles, and effective engagement with young people over the longer-term is likely to require an approach that prioritises relationships and not fear, with appropriate boundaries and transparency about police duties and responsibilities clearly communicated to young people.

**Relationship-based practice, whereby the aim is to develop positive relationships between police and young people characterised by feelings of trust and safety, may help encourage young people to engage openly with police and report experiences of HSB, as well as engage with any interventions provided by police due to involvement in HSB:** Punitive, fear-based approaches may be seen as effective in suppressing behaviour but there is no evidence that they have a long-term meaningful effect and may even be counterproductive. Police require training and support for frontline work with young people designed to build relationships.

**Police responses to incidents can be hampered by delays and it is unlikely that incidents will be dealt with formally by police due to lack of evidence and/or public interest considerations:** There are various outcomes that can result from police investigation of incidents but young people may lack faith or credibility in the process if there is insufficient transparency regarding what is likely to, and ultimately does, happen.

**Abstract education about legal categories of sexual abuse and violence may not align with young people's experiences (personal or vicarious) of the justice system:** Young people are not always being taught about criminal justice processes and the complexities of how incidents are responded to. Incongruence in these regards when incidents arise may exacerbate issues within the peer group and for those involved in and affected by HSB.

**Young people can be reluctant to report HSB and there are cultural implorations that inhibit reporting:** 'Anti-snitch' cultures are entrenched with implications for safeguarding of young people reporting HSB. Delays and uncertainty to the process and the wider ramifications for young people may cause or exacerbate poor mental health and social ostracism among both those involved in and affected by HSB.

**Information sharing and multiagency working is vital but needs to be underpinned by shared professional perspectives and processes for sharing information:** Police value being kept abreast of new and evolving HSB among young people, even if they do not act formally in response to specific incidents shared with them. This can help police maintain an accurate picture or HSB and ensure safeguarding of young people is informed by a full understanding of their patterns of behaviour.

**Both under- and over-sharing of information is a problem, with schools potentially struggling to safeguard when they are not kept abreast of developments and outcomes from police:** Incidents of HSB come to the attention of police through various channels and schools may not always be fully aware of what is happening. Schools may not always be able to safeguard effectively and may lack confidence in their ability to safeguard within a context of poor information sharing and limited resources for safeguarding.

**High thresholds for statutory and non-statutory services, coupled at times with poor appreciation of the complexities of peer-on-peer abuse, may mean that young people's needs are not always identified or met in response to incidents:** This is an issue of provision and funding, as well as understanding and attitudes, and may serve to reinforce assumptions about who is likely to be involved in or affected by HSB in terms of risk and need profiles.

# 1. Defining Harmful Sexual Behaviour

This section outlines how participants defined HSB. It situates their perspectives within the wider research literature and evidence on what constitutes HSB, where it takes place, and who is involved and affected.



Source: Regional Police CPD Session, 2023

## Continuum of harmful sexual behaviour

When asked about extra-familial peer-on-peer HSB, participants typically framed it as unfolding across a continuum. A police officer working in the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU), for example, referred to forceful sexual conduct, such as "kissing people" without their consent, to "full on sexual offences" (HHPU1).

A continuum-based approach to defining HSB is found in the literature. For example, Hackett's (2010) continuum details normal, inappropriate, problematic, abusive, and violent behaviour (see Appendix I). 'Normal' sexual behaviour is not inherently problematic or linked to negative outcomes but is to be expected and may be beneficial to young people's socio-sexual development and wellbeing (Fava and Bay-Cheng, 2013; UNESCO, 2018). Where it becomes harmful, young people's sexual behaviours include direct interpersonal interactions or contact, which may be physical or verbal and may take place online or offline, as well as indirect acts such as spreading rumours about someone (Dobson, 2019; Renold, 2018). HSB occurs in a variety of spaces and places within and beyond school (Fritz and Firmin, 2016). The behaviours may be illegal (e.g., rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment), problematic but not illegal (e.g., gendered and sexualised bullying/cyber-bullying) or occupy a legal 'grey area' such as pressured or complied with sexual activity.

While acknowledging the continuum of HSB, several police officers in the project pinpointed the limitations of the law in capturing and addressing the nuances of young people's sexual behaviours across the continuum, including because of how the acts themselves may not be illegal or the legal status may be ambiguous. There were also concerns about acting in the public interest and/or the children's best interests when responding to incidents. HHPU1, for instance, felt that some of young people's sexual behaviours may reflect developmentally normative "standard curiosity" among young people that may be enacted without malicious intent and/or immediate obvious harm, but that may be proscribed in law, with implications for the policing of HSB. For example:

> "[sexual activity between two 14-year-old young people to which] they both consented... give it two, three years, and there's no police involvement whatsoever... it is 'age appropriate'. It's just a little bit too early in the developmental stage."

Acknowledging the importance of context, this officer felt that a more complicated matter would, for example, arise if the incident involved:

> *"…an 18-year-old with a 14-year-old. It would have to be taken on a case-by-case basis, because… an 18-year-old could forcefully rape a 14-year-old and then absolutely deserve the punishment and the consequences that come with that. But if they're in a relationship… there should potentially be another way to deal with it… It's an offence, you can't do it, you're dealt with. But does that guy deserve to then be on the register for the rest of his life? But, again, that's very grey, because a rape isn't a rape, it's not that black and white."*

This perspective raises questions regarding the feasibility – and desirability – of dealing with HSB through the law and criminal justice processes, as well as the factors that may shape determinations of what is in the public interest and children's best interests when responding to cases such as these. As is discussed in section 4, there may be limitations on the ability of the law – conceptually and in practice – to fully arbitrate over and address every incident that may come to the attention of police.

Some participants' judgments regarding what is and is not a police matter and what action should be taken were shaped by factors that seemed to reflect adult-centric biases and assumptions about young people's sexual behaviours and the causes of harmful conduct. There is a question here about what is considered 'normal' sexual behaviour. According to an online safety expert interviewed for the project, often these judgments are mediated by adults' beliefs regarding what is acceptable, compared to what is typical behaviour among young people that simply makes adults uncomfortable.

Furthermore, as returned to in section 4, any nuances of the law in practice are not always reflected in educational messaging directed to young people. A police officer, for example, explained that: "while… there [may only be] a couple of years difference between you and that person… they're still a victim and it's still illegal; it's still an offence" (HHPU2). It is these legal categories that are oftentimes communicated to young people in educational interventions, while explanations about how the law is typically applied in practice are less likely to be provided, an issue addressed in greater depth and with recommendations for practice outlined, respectively, in sections 4 and 5.

## Contexts and dynamics of harmful sexual behaviour

Adult participants were mostly concerned with interpersonal HSB between individuals, with less mention of group dynamics. Young people, however, spontaneously mentioned group-level behaviours as being of concern. For example, the group of girls referred to sexist language and verbal or physical harassment of girls by boys:

> *"I think, there's some boys in my year specifically, and I can picture exactly the group. They think that it's funny to like, play on the fact that like, like, basically that women should be at home, like dishwasher like being called that and like, although they might not think in their head, they think it's funny to say it and like still play on that, even though you know, they might not think it, but they think oh, that's a laugh."*

These girls were concerned about "pressure," "being harassed," "trying to convince someone to do something they don't want to do," and "being violent with your voice." They said that boys may attempt (successfully or unsuccessfully) to "grab" girls, often in public places, including in school. They described their awareness of this conduct as stemming from personal and vicarious experiences among girls as well as social media dissemination of incidents of HSB: *"…when you're out, sometimes you might see something happen, or you hear about it on social media on people's stories."*

The girls distinguished between more positive interpersonal interactions between girls and boys when alone together and the potential for more harmful interactions when in groups:

> *"… [when it is] just a boy and a girl, [boys] can be all, like, soft and stuff. But if it's in groups, they couldn't really speak or anything… or sometimes they even make fun of girls… they'd be like, 'oh, yeah, I did this to… I done this with this girl I'm dating,' she would be standing there…*

> *they would say something horrible, horrible about her… the boys think it is like hilarious. And it's just really not."*

These forms of HSB were noted by some adult participants. A Youth Engagement Officer with Surrey Police (YEO) (YEO1), for instance, referred to boys engaging in lower-level harassing behaviours sometimes "for a laugh" but that it may also involve targeting of "vulnerable" girls by groups of boys, for example for "images" (see more on online image sharing below). For this officer, consensual sexual behaviour (online or offline) between young people "in relationships" is:

> *"…not the issue… The issue [for example] …is the group mindset of, we're going to have a WhatsApp group, we're going to chat about it, then we're going to go and try to get these images from this vulnerable girl… it's just worrying behaviour…".*

This officer's perspective highlights the contextual contingencies of young people's sexual behaviours and the dynamics of power, exploitation and vulnerability that may be apparent among and between those involved. Research evidence suggests that these contingencies also apply to associated issues of concern such as other forms of relationships and 'dating' violence and abuse, youth violence, bullying and exploitation (Barter, 2009; Farrer and Co and Firmin, 2017, in Lloyd, 2019; Sabina, Cuevas and Cotignola-Pickens, 2016). How they operate as causal factors are addressed further in section 2.

Bystanders and witnesses may observe or become involved in HSB (e.g., through joining in with bullying or harassing someone) or may act as 'generalised others', for example as pertains to 'peer pressure' and the social expectations that shape young people's interpersonal sexual conduct and interactions (see Jackson and Scott, 2010). These pressures and expectations have the potential to affect all young people, with, for example, the school receptionist, who had extensive experience informally talking with students in school, describing a boy with:

> *"…lots of issues… he comes across… sort of rude and arrogant initially… we talked about the fact he's got a girlfriend… she's quite dominating on him…. She's demanding lots of him… and [he] initially said… I don't really want to do this… but it's the cool thing to do… I don't really want a girlfriend."*

The matter of how gender intersects with involvement in and experiences of HSB – including the ways that may be harmful for boys – is discussed further below in this section and in section 2.

## Consent and harmful sexual behaviour

Several participants identified consent as a defining, or at least pertinent, factor in HSB. They referred to acts and incidents whereby consent was violated, including through direct, indirect, proximal and distal forms of coercion and pressure. These acts and incidents take place online and offline. Examples include non-consensual distribution of nude/semi-nude images by and among young people, sending of sexually explicit images without consent, non-consensual sexual touching and sexual activity (spanning assault up to and including rape), and consumption of pornography in public places or in the company of others without their consent.

In England, the Sexual Offences Act (2003) defines consent as free and informed choice given by someone who has the capacity to make that choice (Cooper, 2018). Consent has been conceptualised in academic literature as requiring an internal feeling of willingness and an externally communicated indication of agreement that the respective parties intend and interpret as consent (Muelhenhard et al., 2016). Non-consensual sexual experiences and behaviours may arise from absent communication, miscommunication or misinterpretation regarding consent (see Setty, 2023), while substance use (including alcohol and legal or illegal drugs) may compromise capacity and negate consent (Smith, Kolokotroni and Turner-Moore, 2020).

The 'affirmative consent' model holds that sexual activity should only take place if there is clear and expressed agreement for it to occur, given freely and with capacity, and with 'initiators' of sexual activity being responsible for obtaining that agreement (see Mueller and Peterson, 2012; Gilbert, 2018). Advocates

of affirmative consent suggest that it helps reduce the risk of non-consensual and unwanted sexual activity from occurring, through emphasising that 'no means no' and anything other than a clear and direct 'yes' does not constitute consent. Consent and non-consent are not, however, always an either-or and, like HSB, range along a continuum characterised by agreed to or wanted sexual activity (which may or may not be judged as developmentally normative or appropriate), through to normalised unwanted activity or behaviours, to pressure, coercion and force (Beres, 2007; Whittington, 2021). Feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty about what is wanted and agreed to have been found among both young people and young adults (Cameron-Lewis and Allen, 2013; O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1999; Setty 2023).

There was some acknowledgment among participants that dynamics of consent may be complex insofar as compromised or absent consent may not always be immediately apparent. Some participants referred to forms of HSB that are normalised among young people, for example sexualised verbal harassment, typically by boys toward girls. While often unwanted by girls, the issue of consent was less central because, from the perspective of participants, these acts are just tolerated as part of day-to-day life for girls and so are not always experienced or acted upon as non-consensual HSB. Similar points were made regarding direct interpersonal violations of consent, whereby some participants felt that girls may not identify or report non-consensual experiences, even when clearly forced or coerced, because they are normalised and expected within their relationships. As noted below, however, adults themselves may also frame direct interpersonal violations of consent as 'blurred' or as constituting a 'grey area.'

Pressures and expectations affecting young people may be indirect or distal, insofar as they arise from the wider social and cultural contexts that young people inhabit beyond the specific interpersonal encounter. Young people may, for example, experience 'peer pressure' to be sexually active (potentially more so among boys) or to achieve a romantic relationship and so may agree to or, perhaps, pursue or initiate sexual activity that is unwanted by themselves and/or their partner. Distal pressures and expectations affecting young people—whether accompanied by direct and/or proximal interpersonal pressure or coercion—were identified by participants as potentially impacting the choices young people make in their relationships and difficulties in refusing unwanted sexual or other intimate activity. For example, a teacher remarked:

> "…[girls] feel once they kiss somebody, that then they're expected [to do more] even though this person is not forcing them to do anything… because I [referring to girls in relationships with boys] can't say no… how do I stop him… I know the next step, otherwise I look stupid…"

Some adult participants believed that young people may not always recognise HSB or respond to it as abuse. Yet adults themselves described making subjective judgments about what constitutes a clear violation of consent versus a 'grey area' of consent. For example, a DSL in a school recounted an incident previously brought to their attention involving a girl stating that a boy continued to engage in painful sexual activity with her despite her telling him to stop. This participant described the incident as reflecting 'normalised' and 'invisible' pressure despite how the girl communicated her non-consent through telling the boy to stop.

Another complexity relates to the interpretation of different dispositional and situational variables and the conclusions drawn by adults about the implications for defining an incident as consensual or not. For example, a DSL described a situation involving a "male student alleged to have raped another female student" in a park. The "girl has got some [autism] and SEN [special educational needs] and is very kind of particular… they had sex outside… it wasn't that she didn't consent to the [sexual] act, she didn't consent to where it took place." Following police investigation, the incident was defined as "actually consensual… it wasn't rape." While potentially a legitimate outcome from a legalistic perspective, there are broader matters in such cases to address regarding whether and when consent is considered compromised. Here, it should be acknowledged that not consenting to the location of sexual activity is a significant issue that compromises consent overall, even if not reaching a legal threshold.

There are also temporal interactional dynamics of sexual interactions to consider, whereby young people may re-define an experience as non-consensual after the event. For example, a situation described by an

online safety expert involved a: "young man who met up with a girl he had been speaking to on Snapchat, a friend of a friend. They were sharing location and she turned up at his school on a Friday afternoon. He was 15." They were both "excited" to see each other after chatting online for a couple of weeks and had sex in the woods. Afterwards, the boy noticed that she had self-harm marks at the top of her thighs and on reflection, he told his pastoral lead at his school that he did not think she had the capacity to agree to have sex with him. However, at the time he panicked and told the girl: "we've made a mistake and shouldn't do this again." She went to the hospital and reported him for rape. In this instance the young man had recognised his partner's vulnerability and through 'rejecting' her, while trying to do the right thing from his perspective, ended up being accused of sexual assault. A comparable scenario was identified in Surrey Police incident data (see Appendix III), whereby a boy retrospectively realised that he had sex with an underage girl and experienced considerable anxiety about his legal culpability, although it was ultimately concluded that there was no evidence that he knowingly perpetrated statutory rape.

## Online image-based harassment and abuse

Research evidence suggests that the internet and networked technologies have increasingly become part of how young people form relationships and experience sexual development (Scott et al., 2020). Young people express positive perspectives on the opportunities presented to them by these developments, as well as awareness of the risks and disadvantages of interacting online. This includes regarding how 'digital intimacies' in the form of sexual messaging and image sharing may be experienced as a way to experience intimacy and, in some cases, delay physical sexual activity (British Pregnancy Advisory Service, 2018; Katz and Asam, 2020; McGeeney and Hanson, 2017; Phippen, 2017; Setty and Dobson, 2023; Vanden Abeele, 2016; Vanwesenbeek, et al. 2018).

Adults tend to take a more negative view, often believing that online interactions and relationships are inherently risky and harmful for young people and that young people have a tendency to act irresponsibly (Edwards and Wang, 2018). Across adult participants participating in the primary research informing this guidance, there was extensive concern, in particular, about young people's involvement in sexual image sharing online. When police officers attending the regional CPD session on HSB were asked for their views on what constitutes the most significant form of HSB, the largest proportion selected 'sexual image sharing online' (n=21, 62.0%) from a list of contact and non-contact offence categories.

*"…problems that we've seen in school, a lot of the stuff is sexual videos, so naked videos, and text messaging, asking like kids to do things, they do things, record it, then it ends up going on TikTok, Snapchat… I had one job, I think that ended up going around, like three different schools, photos, and a young girl… they said that the phone had been hacked, but I think it was… the boyfriend, and these photos of her naked doing things just ended up going around to three different schools, and it just escalated and escalated… it was horrific for her." (Police, YEO1)*

Sexual image sharing involving under 18s has been responded to and dealt with in preventative education as illegal under laws designed to prohibit the production, storage and exchange of sexual images of minors (the most recently updated legislation is the Sexual Offences Act 2003 but the original legislation is very dated – Protection of Children Act 1978).

Those experiencing abuse risk facing legal consequences for their participation in image sharing. However, 'Outcome 21' (no further action but the incident is recorded) and 'Outcome 22' (diversion, education or other intervention) is increasingly being used to avoid the undue criminalisation of young people involved in image sharing.

Analysis of Surrey Police incident data found that 11.8% of incidents involving extra-familial HSB among young people was recorded as 'cybercrime'. In terms of offence type across all incidents (whether or not flagged as 'cybercrime'), the biggest offence category was rape (28.1%) and then sexual assault of a female aged 13+ (20.8%) with malicious communications representing 0.5% of cases and obscene publications 16.5%. Judging by the qualitative incident records, however, there may be disparities in categorisation because some case examples of 'other sexual offences' (17.3% of the total recorded incidents) and 'other criminal offences' (16.5%) related to online image sharing. It is not, therefore, possible to gain a conclusive picture of responses to incidents of image sharing among young people from the available data.

Extensive literature suggests that young people's perspectives on and experiences of 'sexting', 'nudes' and image sharing are nuanced (Ringrose et al., 2012). Image sharing is de facto illegal when featuring or involving minors and adults typically assume that it will be harmful for young people, either at the time as an act of 'self-exploitation' (Hasinoff, 2015) or subsequently if their images are 'leaked' and they suffer social and reputational consequences. Yet, it has been found in studies that image sharing may sometimes take place consensually or entail developmentally normative practices that are not inherently harmful to young people (Wolak and Finkelhor, 2011). Extensive quantitative and qualitative research suggests that image sharing does not always lead to harmful outcomes for young people and that young people participate in image sharing for a variety of reasons and with a range of beneficial and harmful outcomes (Anastassiou, 2017; Cooper et al., 2016; Mori et al., 2022)

Image sharing may, however, involve aggravated or abusive elements that should be responded to as HSB. It may, for example, involve non-consensual production of, unwanted solicitation (pressure) for images, as well as sending unwanted images ('cyber-flashing' or 'unsolicited dick pics'), non-consensual further distribution of images, and faked or non-consensually recorded or produced images (e.g., 'up skirting') (Henry, Flynn and Powell, 2018; Marcotte et al., 2020; McGlynn et al., 2017; Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021; Setty, Ringrose and Regehr, 2023). It also involves coercion to produce images and threats to release images (or 'sextortion') (Wolak et al., 2018).

Abusive image sharing has been termed 'technologically facilitated sexual violence' (TFSV) (Henry and Powell, 2018), 'image-based sexual abuse' (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017) and 'image-based sexual harassment and abuse' (IBSHA) (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021). These terms have been developed in response to concerns about colloquial terminology like 'revenge porn', which is problematic because, first, it misrepresents intimate images/films as 'pornography' and suggests that the motivation for perpetrating the offence relates to enacting revenge – and may, therefore, even be justified – rather than as being about coercion and control (see McGlynn, Rackley and Houghton, 2017).

The law covers IBSHA through the relatively new offences of upskirting, non-consensual distribution of intimate images/films and cyberflashing, but may be inadequate because they do not focus enough on consent. For instance, cyberflashing requires 'intent to harm' whereas legal experts argue that the lack of consent is what causes harm (McGlynn, 2022; UCL News, 2022).
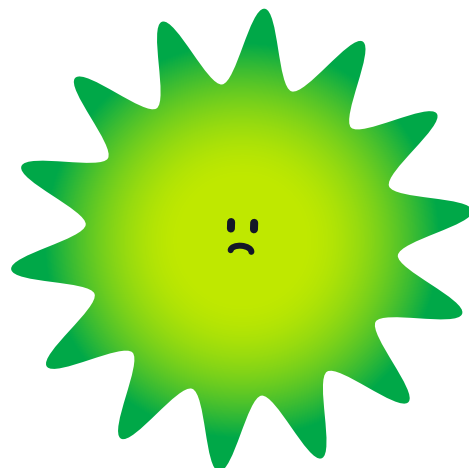
The Law and IBSHA:

Non-consensual distribution of sexual/intimate images: The Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 criminalised the sharing of private sexual images or videos without the consent of the individual depicted, with the intent to cause distress and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 updated the law to include threat to share images/videos. The Online Safety Act 2023 further updated the law by removing the need to prove intent to cause distress. Those found guilty of the offence face up to six months in prison, while where it is proven that the perpetrator intended to cause distress, alarm or humiliation, or to obtain sexual gratification, they could face up to two years in prison.

Upskirting: The Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 makes it a criminal offense to take a photograph or video beneath someone's clothing without their consent, where the individual would have a reasonable expectation of privacy. This offense is, however, currently being revised as part of the Criminal Justice Bill, with the intention to create an offence of intentionally taking/recording an intimate image/film without consent and, as with non-consensual distribution, an extended potential prison term and potential registering and reporting requirements for those doing so with intent to cause alarm, distress or humiliation; or for the purpose of sexual gratification.

Cyberflashing: The Online Safety Act 2023 includes a new offence that criminalises the sharing of imagery (picture or video) of the person's genitals, for the purpose of their own sexual gratification or to cause the victim humiliation, alarm or distress.

Those experiencing abusive image sharing can experience adverse mental health impacts and the abusive behaviours can be part of other forms of relationship abuse both online and offline (Barter et al., 2017; McGlynn et al., 2019; Wolak et al., 2018). Abusive image sharing also connects to other forms of abuse facilitated by internet and networked technologies. For example, Van Ouystel et al. (2019) found that social media can invoke monitoring, scrutiny, and jealousy in relationships which was normalised by young people with blurred lines between what was considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Some evidence suggests that consensual image sharing is more common among young people than is aggravated or abusive image sharing (Bianchi et al., 2016, 2017). However, there are also 'grey areas' and subtle, indirect pressures and expectations that shape image sharing in the absence of direct pressure, force, or coercion (Cooper et al., 2016; Garcia-Gomez, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2012, 2021c; Setty 2019; Thomas, 2018). Image sharing occurs in a social context in which individual and interpersonal experiences and behaviours are shaped by young people's perceptions of what is rewarded and meaningful in wider contexts, in terms of social and relationship capital, which is linked with social hierarchies, status and recognition (Dobson, 2018; Harvey and Ringrose, 2015; Lloyd, 2019; Naezer and Ringrose, 2018). Large-scale mixed methodology research conducted in the UK found that non-consensual image sharing is pervasive, normalised and accepted among young people within these social contexts (Firmin, 2020). Furthermore, social media platform affordances create opportunities for abuse and so hold some responsibility that must be fully considered within this wider social context (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021; Setty et al., 2022).

In terms of available evidence, far more is known about the situation for heterosexual teenagers and about heterosexual image sharing than for LGBT+ teenagers, as well as for older teenagers compared to younger teenagers and children (Van Ouystel et al., 2020). UK research has shown that LGBT+ young people are more likely to pursue and commence online relationships compared to counterparts (McGeeney and Hanson, 2017). Other studies show that image sharing is also relatively common among these young people (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Gámez-Guadix and de Santisteban, 2018; Van Ouystel et al., 2020).

These differences may be because LGBT+ young people use social media more and may be more likely to consider it a safe space and/or may be more accepting of consensual image sharing in sexual and romantic life. Yet, they are also navigating homophobic abuse, discrimination, and body shaming of images online (Ringrose et al., forthcoming).

There was some recognition among participants that the complexities of image sharing among young people are not well captured or addressed in current legislation. These participants noted that the laws being used were designed to address adult offending against children before the internet and networked communication technologies existed in ways that create opportunities for volitional image sharing by and between minors. As such, they considered them potentially outdated, inappropriate and/or ineffective. For example, the police officer below criticised the law and described the introduction of 'Outcome 21' as a way of avoiding the undue criminalisation of young people who share sexual images with peers:

> *"…the age of 18 was to keep children safe, not realising that in however many years, 11, 12 year olds are going to be walking around with basically computers in their hands, to be able to do this and constant communication… that's why things like Outcome 21[1] has been brought in… we have to record it [incidents of image sharing among minors], because… it's a crime, that black and white law… that's a crime because they're under the age of 18. But actually, we're not going to do that, because there isn't those aggravating factors… [we're trying to] circumnavigate… to work with a law that's there…" (YEO3)*

Evidence suggests that the use of Outcome 21 is variable across forces (Phippen and Bond, 2023). It also seems not to be routinely communicated to young people in preventative education (see sections 4 and 5). Likewise, Outcome 22 – involving diversionary, educational or intervention activity – is being used by police in response to some incidents of image sharing among young people but whether young people are aware of it, or how it is being used, is unclear.

## Summary and conclusion

Participants' perspectives indicate a somewhat nuanced understanding of the different types of HSB and the contexts in which HSB takes place. There was inclination among participants toward conceiving of HSB as operating along a continuum whereby it may not always be immediately clear the extent to which and how the behaviour is harmful, malicious and/or illegal, which aligns with the wider evidence base on the complexities of HSB among young people. Despite participants' extensive concern about image sharing among young people, there was some recognition that criminal justice responses are typically not in young people's or the broader public interest. There was some suggestion that legal frameworks may not adequately capture the nuances of either online or offline HSB, underscoring the need for holistic, multiagency working that addresses the contexts of HSB in a tailored and nuanced way. The following section outlines participants' perspectives on the causes of HSB, which, when considered alongside the wider evidence base, further highlights this need.

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1. "This outcome code allows the police to record a crime as having happened but for no formal criminal justice action to be taken, as it is not considered to be in the public interest to do so." (College of Policing, 2016, updated 2023 https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/responding-taking-or-sharing-nude-and-semi-nude-images-young-people#:~:text=Outcome%2021,-Action%209&text=This%20outcome%20code%20allows%20the,public%20interest%20to%20do%20so.)

# 2. Explaining Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Participants' perspectives on the causes of HSB related extensively to individual- and family-related factors and, somewhat, to social and cultural factors. The internet, social media and networked communication technologies were also frequently mentioned as causal factors for HSB.

> ## Causes of HSB
>
> Peer pressure
>
> Poor understanding/education including of consequences
>
> Family life, values and relationships
>
> Religion, culture
>
> Learnt behaviour
>
> Lack of attention/attention seeking
>
> Lack of supervision and discipline
>
> Support networks
>
> Lack of role models
>
> No/few opportunities to talk
>
> Desire for inclusion, need to please and fear of missing out
>
> Naivety
>
> (poor) Mental and emotional development, health and wellbeing
>
> Normalisation of 'extreme' behaviour
>
> Embarrassment, shame, losing face
>
> Vulnerability
>
> Social media, music, advertising
>
> Previous experience of victimisation
>
> Pain

Source: Regional Police CPD session 2023

## Individual and family related factors

The individual and family related factors often cited by participants (and supported by wider literature e.g., Malvaso et al., 2020) included:

· Childhood exposure to domestic and/or sexual violence in the home and other Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs), which were deemed to model and normalise both enactment and experience of HSB by young people.
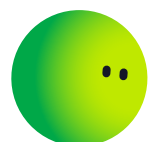
*"…some form of neglect [in the family] is the most common thing, whether that's like emotional neglect, physical neglect, something of that kind of nature of the time. Again, there might be sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, those kinds of things. And then what tends to happen is there's some exposures or something sexual along the way, whether that's pornography or whether that's witnessing something."* (Senior Therapeutic Practitioner, residential setting for boys involved in HSB)

- Special Educational Needs (SEN), which were deemed to compromise understandings of consent and in/appropriate sexual behaviour.

*"…when we looked at the… SEN young people, they often felt it was consensual, or it was usual, or it was normal." (Online Safety Expert)*

- Poor mental health and wellbeing, which was considered a factor for those involved in and affected by HSB both as an antecedent to and consequence of incidents (the consequential aspect is discussed further in section 4).

*"I think a lot of kids that are from traumatic families and have ACEs… when they then start having relationships, it then follows through with them. And because there is no education around it with young people, the cycle isn't broken …if a young girl is in a relationship with a boy for the first time, and that is the only relationship that she is aware of and she has got ACEs, she's then in a relationship with a young man who has come from a family full of ACEs, and has witnessed coercive controlling behaviour …she, the new girlfriend, is then going to think that that is a normal relationship and the boy is then going to continue controlling that female" (Police, YEO1)*

YEO1 explained that 'learnt behaviour' means that rarely do those experiencing HSB report it themselves; instead, it "usually… comes out through… a female talking to her friends and her friends then disclose that to the teacher… the kids that are actually in that relationship don't necessarily know that they are in an unhealthy relationship."

Police participants who were predominantly working with adult offenders traced adult offending back to experiences of abuse as a child or otherwise challenging family backgrounds with social service involvement being prevalent among these offenders. As outlined further in section 4, there was, in turn, perceived value in intervening early with young people as a way of preventing both youth and adult HSB.

*"…it could be like a domestic violence situation, where they've seen their dad be quite nasty to their mum… I've had people from very privileged backgrounds, but it's very rare… it's not ones that we become aware of… that we can, sort of, record… Typically, there is some kind of chaotic background… [It is possible that] …they [more privileged young people] will see something at school… or they're influenced by other people quite easily and are led down that path… that is more uncommon… There is normally some form of offending or violence within the family setting." (HHPU1)*

As discussed further below, however, it may be that thresholds for formal action and intervention increases the likelihood that those with ACEs and other identified risks and needs are formally brought into the system and so were at the forefront of participants' minds. These factors may not always be apparent, with the senior therapeutic practitioner at the residential service for boys, for example, suggesting that for some boys: *"it seems to be around… conversations with peers, and they feel there's a… pressure, and everyone's doing this sort of thing, everyone's …like sexual and I'm not, and what does that mean about me?"*. There is, therefore, a social and cultural context to young people's involvement in HSB, which, as outlined below, was recognised with varying levels of nuance by participants.

## Social and cultural factors

Several participants identified social and cultural factors as implicated in involvement in and normalisation of HSB. For example, a teacher stated that the issues identified in the independent school sector following Everyone's Invited was not:

*"…shocking or surprising… private schools, particularly with… a boarding perspective… the kind of prank culture that exists in those schools, that kind of culture around you have to do certain things to sort of pass tests and that kind of stuff… there's an expectation about compliance with certain sorts of behaviours within those school environments. And that's all that sort of that links into that kind of social networking, old boys club, all those kinds of things that you hear of. So, I wasn't necessarily surprised about it." (BWG)*

This perspective is noteworthy given the comment by HHPU1 regarding the relative low likelihood that so-called 'privileged' young people (including, potentially, those attending the types of independent schools named in the Everyone's Invited testimonials) are dealt with formally by police.

## Gender and HSB

There was a gendered framing to participants' perceptions, whereby HSB was considered a normative behaviour among boys and a normalised experience for girls. Comments from participants focused particularly on problems of normalisation, poor recognition and low reporting among girls:

*"…our women and girls are still brushing off sexually violent, sexually aggressive language…"*

*"… that's just the way it is… we get dick pics all the time… it's just how it is."*

*"… we're still seeing young women, young girls… not coming forward early enough."*

*"… although the girls know that stuff is inappropriate when it comes to physical touching, I think that it's a bit more blurry when we're talking about aggressive and violent language."*

*"… it starts as brushing against someone… accidentally touching the breast… touching the bottom… girls [say it] was not what I thought it was… I don't know, don't wanna kick up a fuss, because it might have been an accident. But then those behaviours continue to start to escalate."*

It was stated by a police officer (HHPU4) that adolescence is a vulnerable time for normalised HSB among girls because of "wanting to fit in, wanting a boyfriend" and, therefore, accepting harmful conduct in relationships.

The group of girls participating in the research alluded to how awareness of unhealthy relationship behaviours among those experiencing these behaviours may be limited among girls. They believed that girls need help to identify and act on these experiences early before they escalate:

*"…maybe like, as soon as, like, someone says something to you, that's horrible… maybe you should like, if you're in a relationship with them, then get out of that, or try and get help to get out of the relationship before it goes any further."*

*"…you, kind of, just think, oh, they're [boys engaging in coercive or abusive behaviours] probably just having a bad day. But like, they, sort of, like, not brainwash, but they, sort of, do, like, brainwash you into thinking that they're all good."*

*"[they make you feel] scared that if you leave something will happen… I've heard, like, some boys, if you leave me, I'm going to get this girl to jump you or something like that, or I'm gonna kill myself if you leave me… that puts a lot of pressure on that person."*

There was some tendency among participants to overly individualise the way that gender norms inflect HSB, while also, potentially inadvertently, blaming girls for the problem and homogenising young people's diverse experiences (including experiences that may not align with expected gender dynamics). Gendered framings may, furthermore, be reflected in the nature of the incidents of HSB brought to the attention of authorities. A police officer (YEO2) referred to dynamics of image-based sexual abuse:

*"I'm rarely seeing girls sending images of boys [non-consensually]. I'm getting girl-on-girl and groups of boys. I'd say that's quite prevalent: groups of boys asking for nudes… it's, like, a competition as to who can get that female's photo… put it on the group [chat]."*

This officer elaborated that *"if it's a girl-on-girl, situation, it's less likely to be recorded and reported to police [by a DSL]."* Parents may also be more likely to push for police action when involving either online of offline boy-to-girl HSB: *"when it's a girl and a boy, you're more likely to see the reports from parents, at school for parents, whereas when it's a girl-on-girl, they're less likely to report it to us, because they see as experimenting."* This participant's account suggests that the picture the authorities gain of HSB with regard to gender dynamics may be affected by adult judgments and actions. Evidence suggests, however, that while girls are disproportionately likely to experience image-based sexual abuse and harassment, they may also be involved in it and boys may be affected by it (Naezer and van Oosterhout, 2021; Setty et al., 2022).

Surrey Police incident data shows that most recorded 'victims' across all incident types were female (81.4%; 17.8% male) and most 'offenders' were male (89.0%; 10.6% female). In most cases, the dynamic was female victim-male offender (75.9%) then male victim-male offender (12.5%) with a much lower proportion being female-male (5.3%).

Girls were sometimes implicitly framed by participants as ineffective in identifying and reporting HSB and unhealthy relationship patterns. Yet evidence shows, firstly, that their experiences are not solely a result of individual failings but of gender norms and secondly, that boys can experience HSB and may not always be rewarded for involvement in HSB. For instance, Weckesser and Egan (2021) found that boys who report engaging in sexual coercion and girls who report experiencing it are more likely to subscribe to traditional heterosexual gender stereotypes. Expectations of sexual passivity in girls and young women mean they may agree to unwanted sexual activity and articulate that it is wanted, while doing so because of what they think their partner wants (Durham, 2006; Tolman, 2012).

Research has, in turn, found that girls and young women may hold themselves responsible for unwanted sexual experiences and frame it as regrettable or their own fault, rather than as abuse (Handyside and Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose and Harvey, 2017; Hirsch et al., 2019; Vera-Gray, 2016). This self-blame occurs within a social context of sexism and sexual double standards (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Horton, 2023; Renold et al., 2017) which can result in girls and LGBT+ young people being judged harshly for sexual behaviour and blamed – by themselves and others – for HSB that they experience (Bordini and Sperb, 2013; Crawford and Popp, 2003). These judgments can be internalised by those experiencing abuse and can reduce the likelihood of it being recognised, reported, and/or responded to as abuse (Lloyd, 2019; Firmin, 2020).

Sexual behaviour is relatively more socially and culturally rewarding for heterosexual boys and young men or, at least, there is greater potential for it to be rewarding for them (Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 2008; Pascoe, 2013). This association between masculinity and sexual accomplishment and knowingness can cause boys to feel powerless and insecure about themselves but also as entitled to sex (Durham, 2006). The perceived norm associating masculinity with sexual prowess has been linked to boys pursuing sexual activity to impress their friends with their sexual accomplishments, which may compromise consent or lead them to endorse the use of sexual aggression and violence in some cases (Harvey et al., 2013; Robinson, 2005; Setty, 2020a).

## Gender and online HSB

Gender dynamics have been found in research to play out in young people's sexual image sharing cultures, with girls and young women being disproportionately likely to experience abuse and boys and young men disproportionately likely to be involved in enacting abuse (Foody et al., 2021; Henry, Flynn and Powell, 2020; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2021a, 2021c; Wolak et al., 2017). Unsolicited requests for images and pressured image sharing seem to affect girls more than boys and girls are more likely to receive unwanted images, while boys can feel pressure to collect images of girls (Burén and Lunde, 2018; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; Foody et al., 2021; Kernsmith, Victor and Smith-Darden, 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012, 2021b; Temple et al., 2012; Walrave, Heirman, and Hallam, 2014; Wood et al., 2015). Girls are at greater risk of having their images shared without their consent by boys (Johnson et al., 2018; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2012; Setty, 2019).

Girls have, furthermore, been found to blame themselves for and are less likely to report abusive image sharing perpetrated toward them (Setty et al., 2022). They are also more likely to describe feeling negative emotions, including disgust, disrespect, and violation if they are sent unsolicited images (Ringrose et al., 2021a; Setty et al., 2022; Setty, 2019), while boys and gay and bisexual men are less likely to see it as abuse and may even feel positively about it (Marcotte et al., 2020). There seems to be less space in this cultural landscape for girls to articulate their needs or to have them respected by boys (Ringrose et al., 2012; Ringrose and Regehr, 2023, in press; Setty, 2019; Thomas, 2018). LGBTQ+ young people seem also to be subject to relatively high rates of online abuse (Horeck et al., 2024), although more research in this area is required.

As applicable regarding offline forms of HSB, online heterosexual interactions are constrained by sexual double standards and gender inequalities which may explain the disproportionate impact of abusive image sharing on girls. There are different perceived norms and expectations for involvement in YPSI based on gender, with extensive evidence showing that girls are more likely to be stigmatised and shamed if they participate in image sharing and blamed if they are victims of abuse. For boys, meanwhile, it can affirm their masculinity, increase their social status and support peer bonding between boys (Casas et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2016; Crofts et al., 2015; Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Lippmann and Campbell, 2014; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Harvey and Ringrose, 2016; Naezer and van Oosterhout, 2021; Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Setty, 2019, 2020c; Symons et al., 2018).

Images of girls have been termed "digital trophies" for boys who can use them to obtain social reward and capital, thus facilitating non-consensual further sharing of the images (Berndtsson and Odenbring, 2020, 6; also see De Keseredy and Schwartz, 2016). Motivations for perpetrating non-consensual image sharing include 'for fun', to 'impress friends', to 'control the person in the image' or to 'embarrass' or 'get back at' the person in the image and perpetrators may see it as a joke or otherwise not a big deal (Brenick et al., 2017; Clancy, Klettke and Hallford, 2019; Powell et al 2020; Setty et al., 2022). The normalisation of the wider masculine homosocial reward economy of image sharing means that practices such as sending unwanted 'dick pics' (Ringrose et al., 2021a) are often not recognised as abuse in day-to-day contexts even though perpetrators may be aware of the negative impacts on victims (Clancy et al., 2019; De Keseredy and Schwartz, 2016; Setty et al., in 2022). Victims of IBSAH, meanwhile, describe experiencing the acts as shaped by misogyny and entitlement (McGlynn et al., 2019).

## Nuancing the role of gender in online and offline HSB

Whether prevention and response pertain to online or offline HSB, it is not enough just to implore girls to do better but to address the wider gendered contextual causes of HSB, normalisation and a lack of willingness to intervene, report or otherwise act upon HSB among young people.

Some of the girls participating in the primary research conducted to formulate this guidance criticised the unequal gender norms and expectations that they felt operate to the detriment of girls and may benefit boys or lead to boys enacting HSB.

*"…if a boy does something [sexual] with a girl, it's all fine. But if a girl does something with a boy, they're either called a slag or slut or a whore or something like that."*

> *"…like, if a boy did something [sexual]… all the boys will be like, oh, yeah, come on, well done… and all just call that girl names and stuff, will be horrible to her. Because it's like, apparently, women are supposed to be respectful for themselves, for their body and stuff."*

At the same time, however, the girls felt that HSB enacted by girls toward boys or toward other girls may not always been identified or responded to as serious, or as HSB at all:

> *"Sometimes you see, like, girls, like, grabbing on to boys or whatever. Maybe, like, for attention, or something… but, like, people don't think it's… girls doing it… just that it's always the boys."*

They said that boys may experience unwanted sexual interactions that are not captured under current normative beliefs about HSB: *"I know people that are girls that have also pushed to, like have sex… pressure them [boys]… or said stuff to them, to make them want to do it. I know it isn't always boys [enacting HSB]."*

Likewise, they pinpointed how masculinity norms may increase a boy's vulnerability to agreeing to unwanted sex because they may *"try and be cool, maybe in front of their friends, because then they can go and say, oh, yeah, I did this with this girl… because some people [including boys] call each other like frigid or something like that."*

The scope for boys to experience or be affected by HSB was also noted by a teacher, who felt that boys are less likely to identify and discuss experiences of HSB in the form of unwanted exposure to sexual imagery compared to girls:

> *"…the boys don't necessarily talk about that. So, they're obviously having the same exposure to this kind of inappropriate imagery. But they don't they don't tend to talk about it, whereas the girls do." (BWG)*

These perspectives align with evidence suggesting that boys may struggle to identify or have addressed any HSB that they experience themselves. For example, boys may feel and experience social performative pressure or peer pressure to be heterosexually active, which may mean they pursue sexual activity that is personally unwanted or about which they feel ambivalent, albeit willingly (Setty, 2022, 2023). These pressures can also affect their ability to see themselves as capable of being violated or harmed, because of the perceived norm of boys initiating and always wanting sexual activity.

The pressures that facilitate and normalise image-based sexual abuse and harassment by boys, described above, work in similar ways. Evidence suggests that while there may be less perceived stigma and risk regarding male bodily expression, there are peer hierarchies, in which some boys face marginalisation and shaming (e.g., as 'unattractive', 'desperate', 'creeps', etc.) and that, in turn, underpins the abuse of boys (e.g., shaming and ostracism of boys often characterised, and trivialised, as 'banter') (Ravn et al., 2021; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., in press; Setty, 2020b). This context means that some boys may choose to avoid participating in image sharing because of the perceived risks they face. However, there is limited evidence that these decisions are based on sexual ethics, but instead the ways that young people are navigating and negotiating gendered terrains of risk (Setty, 2020b).

Across online and offline sexual behaviours, some participants in the project accorded girls a lack of agency in both their consensual sexual behaviours and their involvement in HSB. There was little expectation that girls may actively and willingly choose to engage in sexual activity. Furthermore, there was evidence of practice that reinforced the gendered framing of sex as something boys *do to* girls. For example, an online safety expert recalled a survey administered in a school whereby girls were asked if they had ever *suffered from particular experiences*, while boys were asked if they had *witnessed these behaviours or thought they were acceptable*:

> *"And we asked [girls] things like, has anyone ever used sexual violent aggressive language towards you, for example, called you a bitch, a whore, slack, slut anything like that?"*

In this survey, there were seemingly no questions regarding the equivalent terms often levelled at boys, such as indicators of sexual status like 'player', 'f**k boy', or sexual shaming relating to penis size, or being called a 'perv', a 'paedo', or homophobic slurs around femininity and being 'gay'. The preconceived framing by participants of HSB as happening along a heterosexualised gender binary may contribute to both the reinforcement of expected HSB among heterosexual boys and the negation of the equivalent behaviours experienced by boys who may not fit normative gendered expectations for sexual behaviours and experiences.

A DSL in a school felt that the power and reward available to boys through the enactment of HSB depends on their specific peer contexts, with not all boys supporting acts like abusive image sharing: "… [abusive image sharing] depend on their peer groups… there are some groups [of boys] …that would have been kind of, you know, banter… getting nudes out of girls, that kind of stuff." This participant recounted an incident that unfolded differently: a boy had "asked for a topless image of a girl… and he got quite threatened by his peer group" because the behaviour was deemed shameful and inappropriate by his peers. The girls interviewed for the project likewise said that boys may think it is "safer" to ask for images on Snapchat because they think the request will "disappear" but that "you can get screenshots, you can get recordings of what the boy was trying to say… That's when it goes on the story [the public social media feed]." If this happens to boys, they may, the girls said, be shamed by peers for their sexual advances.

## Ethnicity, culture and HSB

While gender, sexual orientation and social class seemed to play direct and indirect roles in shaping the understanding and response to allegations of HSB described by participants in the project, most did not tend to mention ethnicity or culture explicitly, it was more implied. Only one participant, YEO2, directly referred to HSB and ethnicity:

> "…international schools… it's quite extreme… we had a WhatsApp group where… it was 16, 17 different boys all from different cultures or from different walks of life… they added a female into this group and said how they wanted to rape her… we had to do something; they needed to understand that that's not acceptable behaviour… when the discussion was had, it was very much an open dialogue… it's about educating them… it's not okay. And that is… how people have been brought up, their backgrounds and their culture… it's so varied."

The incident data from Surrey Police showed that the largest proportion of 'offenders' and victims were white, but the data is difficult to interpret due to the high proportions of unrecorded ethnicity (see Appendix II). While Surrey Incident data is inconclusive, there is extensive wider evidence on the higher rates of criminalisation of black and minority ethnic males in particular.

The manager of statutory children's services expressed concerns that some young people are subject to "adultification" by adults, including along racial, ethnic and sexual orientation lines whereby they lose their 'child-status', including as pertains to safeguarding, when alleged to be involved in HSB and may have acts of HSB enacted against them negated.

> "…there are a lot of young people that are 'adultified' because of their race and ethnicity or… gay young men or those that are trying to find their way around their identity… violence against women and girls is absolutely the right thing because I understand the prevalence there. But I do think we miss Black and Asian young men too, particularly young men who may be gay or bisexual, or in that space, or non-binary."

While advocating for a 'gender-sensitive approach', this participant felt that it is important to identify how gender and other factors impact young people's experiences of HSB and the recognition (or lack of) among adults.

## The role of demographics, risks and needs amid service threshold levels

Irrespective of demographic characteristics, it seemed that without additional risk factors or needs (pertaining to SEN or ACEs in particular), those involved in HSB may be unlikely to reach the threshold for intervention or may not be deemed to require intervention. The lack of scope for intervention seemed related both to attitudinal factors on the part of participants and a service threshold issue. There is scope here for identification and response to HSB to be based on adult-centric understandings of risk and need profiles which may miss other young people who are involved and affected in HSB who do not adhere to these profiles (see Altinyelken and Le, 2018; Franklin et al., 2015; Rahimi and Liston, 2011).

Where SEN and/or ACEs apply to those involved in HSB, there may be risk of net-widening and up-tariffing because these factors result in young people being more likely to be drawn into formal services. There was, however, indication that SEN on the part of those experiencing or affected by HSB may either cause the incident to be downplayed in seriousness (e.g., because it cannot be established how the person affected acted or related to the situation) or to be considered more serious because of the vulnerability of the person.

On the other hand, examples of incidents dealt with by Surrey Police indicate that formal police action is rarely deemed appropriate or necessary for young people (see Appendix III), with referrals to other services for those identified as having additional needs and risks. Hence, regardless of any identified needs and risks, formal police action may be rare, but for those with these factors, there may be an increased likelihood of referral and action by other services.

## The internet and social media

Consistent with their concerns about online HSB, most adult participants raised the internet and social media as causal factors underpinning the nature of contemporary HSB among young people. They referred both to how access to devices facilitated new and evolving forms of HSB and that online content and social media shape norms and practices among young people, including as pertain to HSB.

### Social media as a negative influence

Many participants were concerned about the influence of social media. In general, the internet was deemed to contain extensive 'misinformation' about sex and relationships and, therefore, to pose challenges to adults regarding the perspectives that young people are developing. Beyond pornography specifically, participants were concerned about the influence of social media. There was widespread belief that the perceived increase in HSB is linked to the rise of social media, because of the scope for bullying and harassment, normative expectations for appearance, pressure, and exposure to pornography on social media sites. Comments by participants included:

> "...in the last, say, two or three years, we've seen a huge increase of issues... we put it down to a massive use of social media."

> "Lots of bullying on social media... more access to social media resulted in lots of incidents happening."

> "...the bullying, but also the social media expectation to look a certain way, to do certain things to be on trends is just crazy because of that."

> "From the girls' point of view, they try to look a certain way because they follow so many people on social media... trying to aspire to that, tanning to eyelashes, to nails. The boys with their hair, or aftershaves... this constant, constant pressure"

> "...they have to look this way because they want attention, then getting the wrong attention."

> "...the messages here and whoever's on their Snapchat, oh, well, he was being nice to me. And I didn't want to block him because he'll think I'm horrible."

> *"…what I pick up for boys is the use of social media for porn has increased hugely. Images and sharing something that's quite a problem. They can access it more readily… some of them, they may look at the girls in a different way."*

Some participants felt that social media dynamics are shaped by wider status hierarchies in young people's peer groups. For example, that "there always seems to be a leader… what they seem to say… the way they behave, the others copy" (YEO4). This police officer was particularly concerned about the impact on young people who are not attending school, for whom the influence of social media and their immediate peer cultures may be heightened because of how they are spending all their time online and with peers rather than being in school with a more mixed set of influences and, therefore, "they're not getting anything other than their own videos and their peer group view…".

Participants felt that police, schools and others should play a role in educating and safeguarding young people as they navigate new and evolving digital terrains. There was also repeated mention of the role of parents, with some criticism of parents who were deemed not to be adequately informed or engaged in supervision and monitoring of what their child is doing online.

> *"When kids are using social media… nine times out of 10… parents are just completely unaware of what they're doing, and who's on them… Parents think it's [social media] just a calendar app. But, actually, it's not, it's disguised to be something else…" (Police, HHPU2)*

> *"… schools [can] …do a fantastic job [of educating about online risks] but… you need continuity once they're out of schools and at home… the responsibility falls onto parents… sometimes it isn't monitored… a lot of parents don't know…" (Police, HHPU3)*

> *"…as a parent, it's very hard for them to take that phone away… I'm working with a young person on an acceptable behaviour contract, who will refuse to give up her phone to her mum… her mum can't physically look at it… should I be worried about that? … well, yeah, you should, because you don't know what's on that phone…" (Police, YEO2)*

Conversely, some of the participants working in therapeutic roles with young people were concerned that other professionals may have overly negative and deterministic attitudes about the role of technology in young people's lives. For example:

> *"…we always have moral panics about technology, don't we, you know, every generation, you know, it when I was growing up, it was video nasties and, then probably computer games…"* (Senior Therapeutic Practitioner, Child Protection Charity)

These participants recognised the importance of exploring with young people how they can build trust in their relationships by using technology to facilitate intimacy. They recommended a move away from the silos of (un)healthy relationship education on one side and online safety as a separate topic and, instead, connecting the two. This recommendation aligns with arguments made in academic literature regarding best practice involving addressing online and offline issues, including as pertain to sexual behaviour, as interconnected rather than distinct (Finkelhor et al., 2021).

## New and evolving patterns of HSB

> *".… videoing sexual things. We've had a few instances in our area where young people have engaged in activity and the others think it's okay to film that. And it's got sent round up sent round. And it's a real issue because they do not see a problem with it." (YEO4)*

There were also challenges posed by 'disappearing' content on platforms, which young people may use to "hide" their interactions from adults:

> *"…it can make our [police] investigations quite difficult… there's been a lot of these young people who have these conversations on Snapchat, and then it gets deleted immediately… we can't capture that evidentially… like WhatsApp… now got this disappearing messaging…*

> *it's just gonna get harder and harder… it's gonna be easier to hide stuff, technology wise, for offenders. And also, for victims… if they want to keep stuff away from their parents… that teenage age where they're just reckless, and their brains haven't fully matured. And they're taking all these risks, and they want to keep stuff away from their parents…" (HHPU4)*

There was some acknowledgment of the reality of young people's contemporary digitally mediated lives and how this may involve online sexual behaviours akin to the ways that other parts of young people's lives have been re-shaped by the internet and networked communication technologies. However, there was an undercurrent that these developments may be problematic. For example, a police officer working in a team designed to tackle illicit imagery of minors online stated that:

> *"I think we've got to understand why young people [engage in online HSB] …they live in a digital world. Everything is around devices, schools from quite an early age now encourage young people to use iPads laptops… you've got virtual space… Their lives are completely absorbed by a digital space. They learn about relationships online. They communicate with people online… they start sharing images and they don't think twice about it. They're far less inhibited when they're online in a very private space… I think lots of kids are doing it and they know that people are doing it all the time… There are so many reasons why they do it… they don't understand the other reasons why they shouldn't do it and the implications of once they've sent and clicked and lost control over that image… it's not their fault that that image has been circulated throughout their school. They gave that image to somebody for a specific reason not to share it with everybody, but they don't think about that part." (POLIT)*

In this sense, there was widespread belief among participants that HSB is an increasing problem and is difficult to address, with some participants expressing a nostalgic view of previous generations being less affected by HSB because of the absence or lesser influence of the internet and digital media.

> The majority of those at the regional police CPD session (82%, n=28) felt that HSB had got worse during their time as a police officer.

Yet, HSB – in various forms – has long affected young people and is not, therefore, simply a contemporary phenomenon. A manager in statutory children's services commented that seemingly increased prevalence of HSB may relate to increased awareness and willingness to report (notwithstanding the above-discussed concerns about continued issues with awareness and reporting):

> *"I'm not sure that there's any more of this. Probably more reported than… back in the day, if that makes sense. But not really any worse than it was. So, what was seen as banter, or having a laugh or anything like that is no longer seen as banter I don't think. Serious crimes have gone up, so things like girls not being able to consent because they're too drunk. I think like 30 years ago, there would have been… victims blame themselves for being in that situation."*

Furthermore, while young people's socio-sexual development and behaviours have become increasingly digitally mediated, evidence suggests that these developments are (re)shaping longstanding forms of intimate interaction in evolving ways rather than representing completely new developments. Hence, it is important to identify the challenges presented by technology but not in ways that assume that HSB is new nor that dislocate technology and its affects from the wider contexts and conditions of young people's lives. Additionally, it should be noted that digitally mediated HSB may have gained prominence because of a combination of changing patterns of sexual intimacy among young people and the tangible evidence that results from these practices. In other words, young people may be participating in image sharing but these acts may be easier to identify than offline HSB because there is an image that results that may be reported to or detected by adults, whereas offline/contact HSB does not always leave evidentiary traces. This does not mean that HSB is a uniquely digital issue but is more easily detected when taking place online.

It is also noteworthy that some participants, including some of the young people, felt that social media was a space where they felt able to disclose incidents of HSB, or where they can recognise their own negative experiences in the testimonies of others they followed (as seen in Everyone's Invited). Yet, some school staff were concerned about the use of social media for these purposes because, while they endorsed young people's rights to speak up and report abuse, they felt limited in terms of responding to allegations because of the oftentimes anonymous nature of the disclosures and testimonies. For example, a DSL felt that:

*"…if you are going to raise my capacity to be able to respond to that [allegations of HSB] or ask a school's capacity to be able to respond to that was compromised by the fact that we couldn't access the information… every [report] that was online, I went read through trying to find where we were. Because my concern as safeguarding lead was, if there are things happening in school that we don't know about, then then we need to know about it so that we can address it… I think that finding opportunities for people to talk about their experiences of abuse and discrimination is essential… if people are prepared to be honest and open about them… be vulnerable. So, the problem is, is that there's no further action from Everyone's Invited for those individuals who have chosen to disclose their experiences, because it's just about putting their experiences out there. And it's very difficult for people to be able to take those experiences in, from my perspective at this point, and convert that into something that has a value, aside from just sharing those experiences."*

## Pornography

Several participants felt that the internet has led to young people being 'exposed' to excessive amounts of sexually explicit media ('pornography') in ways that cause other forms of HSB, as well as constituting a harm in and of itself because of legal prohibitions on exposing minors to pornography. Data suggests that accessing or encountering pornography is common among young people, particularly older adolescent heterosexual boys (Martellozzo et al., 2016). There is also evidence of LGBTQ+ young people using pornography that portrays people similar to them, including in the absence of adequate RSE in school (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Bryon, et al 2021; Litsou, et al 2020; Dawson et al, 2019; McNair 2014).

Some participants believed that widespread availability and consumption of online pornography is changing young people's expectations for sexual interactions and their attitudes toward and understandings of what is normative and acceptable regarding online and offline sexual behaviours. There was a particular focus on heterosexual boys, with the idea that boys are pursuing risky and harmful sexual acts because of their consumption of pornography. There was a concern that young people are not being sufficiently educated and that pornography is portraying an overly sexualised version of relationships. It was apparent, however, that some of the claims made were not necessarily based on clear evidence for – rather than conjecture regarding – cause and effect.

*"…we've got technology now and they're watching porn… they've got a misinterpreted view. You have what… a loving sexual relationship should be… [porn] doesn't actually represent [that]… I don't watch porn. But it's not in a loving way." (Police, HHPU4)*

*"…young men, young boys, they are looking at these things… that is curiosity… maybe they're not getting education in any other way… that almost becomes the education but they're only seeing the sex side of it, they're not seeing any of the relationship side of things…" (Police, YEO3)*

*"… both young females and young males watching porn, and sort of learning about sex and relationships through that medium… believing that was normal, usual behaviour…" (Online Safety Expert)*

*"…porn, obviously, it's just so readily available… any child of any age could log on to a site if their phones aren't being checked, or they don't have the necessary restrictions… kids are very overly sexualised now, because of the content they can see on TikTok, and Snapchat*

*and all these platforms. I think that needs to be policed. But the companies need to do that. And that's really hard… I think the problem lies with it being just so readily available… what's normal to us [adults] is completely different to what's normal now to a 13-year-old. And what they perceive to be acceptable… if that isn't educated with regards to what is classed as normal, I think that's where the problems lie. As in sharing images, and being so overly sexualised at certain age, to my generation, it isn't normal, but it's surprising when you go into the schools and when you find what images kids do see, and what's been shared. It's sadly normalised to a lot of them." (Police, HHPU3)*

*"I don't think it's a good thing that young people are looking at pornography, although I completely accept that it is going on… when young people say they look at pornography, or when I just talk about it, it's very much please think about actually that is not a real situation. It's fake…You don't strangle somebody while having sex for instance. You don't tie people up and so on. The relationships you need to understand are healthy, respectful relationships… I suppose they may well be looking at pornography for information. And the best way to get information is to speak to people face-to-face about it… speak to your parents. If you're not comfortable speaking to parents, if there's somebody at school you can talk to… a safe secure space, instead of putting it into a browser, where they're going to end up going down a rabbit hole and into all kinds of trouble." (Police, POLIT)*

There was some suggestion among police that young people could find themselves engaging with illicit imagery of minors online as part of a "trajectory" following exposure to pornography whereby they eventually encounter images of child sexual abuse online. There was little mention, however, of the issue of young people being sent pornography via social media platform networks and the technological drivers of sexually explicit material being promoted to young people on the platforms whereby they may encounter and experience pornography – including that features illegal or otherwise problematic content – in a non-consensual or non-volitional way (discussed further below).

As well as leading to involvement in HSB, there was also a perception that young people experiencing or affected by HSB may not recognise it as abuse because of normalised sexual behaviours depicted in pornography:

*"Someone's having sex from behind, and they smack a woman… then young people think that's the way they have to behave… that could even be a consensual sex at the beginning. And then something happens and then the victim thinks, okay, because she's seen it on pornography sites, does she think that's how she should be treated? And that's the saddest part in all of this is that people are getting abused. And it's just normalised because they don't see it as being a victim." (Police, YEO2)*

In contrast, participants working in therapeutic roles tended to suggest that pornography in their experience, was only a minor factor, alongside other more significant factors. For example, a senior practitioner in a residential setting for boys involved in HSB said that:

*"…it's incredibly rare that what we get… details of young people [with] just perfectly normal life, pornography, then offence. Generally, …some form of neglect is the most common thing… And then what tends to happen is there's some exposure or something sexual along the way, whether that's pornography or whether that's witnessing something."*

These perceptions align with 'ecosystem' and 'sexual script theory' approaches to understanding young people's socio-sexual lives and developmental processes. From an ecosystem perspective, any influence of pornography exists within a landscape of intersecting personal, familial, social and cultural factors and contexts, while sexual script theory would suggest that pornography is part of a cultural landscape that shapes how young people formulate and enact expectations for sexual interactions alongside other social and cultural influences (see Jackson and Scott, 2010). When the influence of pornography is considered from these perspectives, it means that while those involved in or experiencing HSB may have consumed pornography, the impact should be considered alongside other relevant factors. Moreover, it should be

noted that not that every young person who consumes pornography will act in harmful ways to themselves and/or others; instead, it is dependent on the other factors at play. For example, for vulnerable young people who have SEN or behavioural issues or are already exposed to neglect or abuse, pornography can be clear a contributing factor to HSB, because of the lack of capacity to critically engage with this content or because of developmental issues.

While, as discussed further below, there is a need for a nuanced understanding of the impact of pornography on young people, there has been mounting concern apparent in society for some time regarding the nature of mainstream pornography, with campaigners arguing that it is becoming increasingly sexist violent and racist (e.g., Glitch UK, 2023; Vera-Gray et al., 2021) and that the industry needs to be more tightly regulated. It is beyond the scope of this report to enter into these debates; instead, the project explored adult perceptions of the issues and identified a preponderance of reductionist and deterministic understandings of the impact of pornography, with some tendency toward blaming pornography for HSB in ways preclude a more nuanced and constructive approach to intervening with young people. The ecosystem system and sexual script theory perspectives regarding the impact of pornography on young people, outlined above, would, evidence suggests, lend itself to a potentially more effective approach. Here, pornography would be treated as part of complex ecology of attitudes and values, with an emphasis on removing shame and creating a safe space within schooling environments for open, non-judgmental conversations with young people about pornography and other sexualised media.

**What is the state of the evidence base on young people and pornography?**

It is ethically and legally difficult to conduct research with young people directly about their consumption of pornography and the impacts on their sexual behaviours and experiences.

A lot of claims about the effects of pornography are based on anecdotal examples of HSB, with there being a lack of firm evidence on incidence and prevalence rates regarding pornography and HSB.

Findings from studies conducted with adults are often applied uncritically to young people, despite these studies typically not establishing cause and effect nor the direction of causation between porn use, attitudes and behaviours.

While it is possible that those involved in HSB may also be engaging or have engaged in 'problematic' porn use, it is likely that the effects of porn occur alongside other relevant factors. Furthermore, the vast majority of young people who consume pornography will not go on to behave in harmful or abusive ways.

Most media representations of sex and relationships are unrealistic and occupy a domain of 'fantasy.' Young people's engagement with different kinds of media are complex and they are often ambivalent in their critique of and attraction to/curiosity about pornography.

Over-emphasising the role of pornography in HSB is likely to be simplistic. Lecturing young people about the supposed risks and harms is unlikely to change their behaviours and may exacerbate shame while failing to support them to develop sexual literacy as they navigate and negotiate different portrayals of sex and relationships within media and the (often exploitative vis-à-vis mainstream pornography) business models that perpetuate these portrayals.

One thing is clear from the evidence – Young people say they want to be able to talk about porn and have opportunities to reflect on what they may be seeing and experiencing. This includes regarding the ways platforms and users on platforms may operate in ways that mean they sometimes lack control over their experiences with porn because they are being sent content that they haven't asked for or otherwise may not have sought out themselves.

Overall, evidence suggests that young people are negotiating pornography in a range of complex ways. Much of the discussion of pornography talks of 'children' being 'exposed' to pornography, with the linguistic suggestion being that children are a homogenous group in need of protection and there being no distinction drawn between young children who may have accidentally stumbled across pornography online and older adolescents who may have actively chosen to engage with pornography to satisfy their curiosity or for their own pleasure. (Lister, 2020; Tsaliki, 2022). Older adolescents, in particular, demonstrate an understanding of the fantasy element and lack of realism in porn (Wright and Stulhofer, 2019) However, while able to talk about the perceived pressures induced by porn regarding unrealistic expectations, body image, performance and addiction (Phippen, 2017, 59), they are equally quick to point out that these harms are just as apparent in mainstream popular culture and are not reserved solely for pornography. Moreover, while young people tend to believe that porn is not realistic and are often critical of it, this does not necessarily stop them from enjoying it (Goldstein, 2020; Litsou et al., 2021; Peter and Valkenburg, 2016; Setty 2021).

There are gender-related issues to consider with pornography. Studies find that boys and young men are relatively more able to talk freely and without shame about pornography while girls and young women are more likely to feel, and experience, shame for engagement with pornography (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Lavoie et al., 2000; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2009; Marston & Lewis, 2014; Rothman et al., 2014; Setty, 2021). Girls and young women may, moreover, be more adversely affected by oppressive standards depicted in pornography regarding bodily appearance and sexual behaviour; yet evidence also suggests that boys and young men can experience 'performance anxiety' and other concerns relating to their internalisation of the standards for male sexual behaviour and appearance in pornography (Phippen, 2017).

There are, therefore, issues to address with young people regarding pornography but it is important to do so in ways that push back against gender norms and expectations and raise critical consciousness among young people rather than just telling them it is bad and that they should not engage with it. The typical approach to delivering porn literacy aimed at young people tends to promote a discourse of what Albury (2014, 173) describes as 'critical disengagement' whereby young people are merely taught the harms of engaging with pornography (Bryon et al., 2020; McNair, 2014). However, while young people should be informed about risks related to pornography engagement (Baker, 2016), Spišák (2016) argues that portraying pornography solely as a risk behaviour may negatively influence young people's perceptions regarding their own use, increasing shame and embarrassment about engagement, sexual exploration and masturbation.

While pornography poses several issues, for most people it does not seem to be an inherently problematic source in their lives (Lehmiller and Rothman, 2020; Grubbs et al. 2019; Marston, 2018; Vertongen et al., 2022). There is little correlation between individuals who see their use of pornography as problematic and their frequency of use. Instead, their feelings of distress are more often attributable to moral incongruence because of internalised shame about their pornography consumption (Stulhofer et al., 2022). Studies suggest that those who hold more conservative, religious or moral beliefs that sex is shameful are more likely to report feelings of their pornography consumption being problematic (Zimmer and Imhoff, 2020; Grubbs et al., 2019; Perry, 2019; Ley et al. 2014). These findings highlight the importance of avoiding shame in responses to young people's sexual behaviours and identities (Dawson et al., 2019).

There is, however, somewhat of a 'catch-22' currently regarding young people and pornography because, Dudek et al. (2022) argue, the framing of pornography as illegal and harmful creates a barrier to engaging in open and honest debate about the issues of young people's access to adult content that is inclusive and reflective of all young people and their diverse experiences. Specifically, the query the extent to which "young people can have a speaking position on these matters when the regulatory environment dictates that they should not have encountered them" (ibid, p.503). The blanket prohibitions on accessing pornography have, moreover, not been proven to have any effect on limiting young people's deliberate and volitional pornography consumption and may have the opposite effect of restricting content related to health and sex education (Albury and Byron, 2015). The recently passed Online Safety Act 2023 includes

requirements on platforms hosting pornographic content to use some form of age verification or age assurance to prevent young people from accessing the content but it remains to be seen whether and how that will address the issues identified with young people's ease of access regarding online pornography (Woods, 2024) and may further entrench the barriers to providing comprehensive and holistic education about pornography to young people.

There are additional issues to consider regarding how young people's experiences with pornography may not always be wanted or volitionally pursued. To the contrary, young people often encounter pornographic content as soon as they participate in a social media platform like Snapchat; research finds that young people are concerned about being sent unwanted pornographic content and would like to have greater control over what they are viewing and what is generated in their algorithmic feeds on platforms like TikTok (Ringrose et al., 2021d). Furthermore, young people are not just navigating exposure to potentially unwanted sexual content but also other forms of unwanted targeting, e.g. phishing, hacking and other attacks targeted toward them due to their perceived age-related vulnerabilities. There is, therefore, a need to recognise and address the differences between teenagers who are choosing to access pornography and those who are encountering pornography without an active choice and, in turn, to consider how consent and rights plays into all these scenarios.

## Summary and conclusion

Participants described a range of individual, familial, social and cultural factors as facilitating and shaping HSB among young people, including in ways that create risk and need profiles across those involved in and experiencing HSB. A lot of the emphasis was on individualistic dimensions of HSB with some of the social and cultural factors at play being framed in terms of a deficit model of young people's attitudes and behaviours vis-à-vis sex and relationships. The wider evidence base shows that the issues transcend the individual, however, and are rooted in longstanding gender and sexual norms that shape and constrain how young people relate to themselves and others, including on a sexual and intimate level. These norms also affect how both young people and adults define and respond to HSB and beliefs and expectations about gender and sexual behaviour may obscure the complexities of how gender inflects HSB.

The internet and networked communication technologies were identified by participants as significantly impacting the contemporary nature of HSB, with pornography, in particular, being deemed a causal factor for patterns of abusive behaviour. Yet, it needs to be acknowledged that HSB is not a solely contemporary phenomena and any influence of online content and platform affordances are part of a broader ecosystem of socio-sexual development and learning for young people and it should not be assumed that there is a direct pipeline of online content to behaviour. The next section provides a clarifying framework for how to situate HSB within a wider social and cultural context while showing due regard for the nuances of how young people are involved in and affected by HSB and how to respond in ways that promote healthy relationships and inclusive sexual citizenship, including through trauma-informed and gender- and sexuality-sensitive practice.
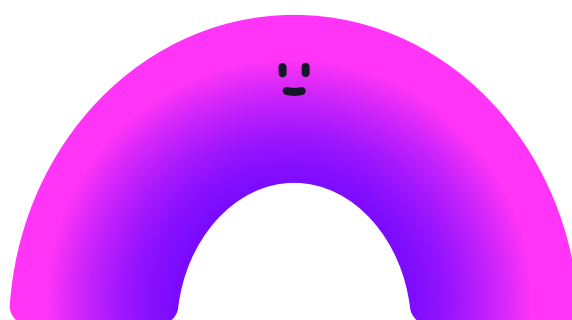
# 3. Conceptualising harmful sexual behaviour and un/healthy relationships among young people

This section draws together the discussion from the previous two sections to offer a framework for conceptualising HSB and un/healthy relationships among young people. This framework shapes the ensuing discussion of policy and practice pertaining to police-school partnerships (section 4) and the recommendations for policy and practice.

## Cultures of harmful sexual behaviour

The complexities outlined thus far and elaborated upon in subsequent sections mean that HSB (and un/healthy relationships more generally) should be understood as encompassing, but going *beyond*, individual and interpersonal actions, behaviours and experiences (Melrose, 2013). HSB can become normalised and legitimised by young people and the adults around them depending on the cultural norms at play, requiring identification of not just *who* is involved but also *where* it takes place and with what effect (Firmin, 2020; Lloyd, 2019). Focusing only on behaviours is conceptually limited because it neglects the social and cultural contexts within which behavioural norms are established and performed and leads to an over-focus on addressing individual behaviours in absence of attendance to the wider contextual causes of HSB (Owens and Lloyd, 2023). This is important to note even when considering interpersonal interactions between young people supposedly away from the direct purview of peers; young people's choices and actions in interpersonal interactions are informed by their perceptions and beliefs regarding normative behaviours, which are, in turn, shaped by their peer contexts (see Jackson and Scott, 2010). Interpersonal interactions can be performed in front of or become the knowledge of peers (see Davies, 2019) and so are never just a matter of decontextualised individual or interpersonal decision-making.

Furthermore, through conceiving of HSB as operating along a continuum, it can be understood as emerging from and impacting young people's peer and school cultures, regardless of where and when it takes place. Behaviours at the lower end of the continuum are part of the same social and cultural contexts from which more serious behaviours emerge. Some of the lower-level behaviours may not, however, always be recognised or responded to as HSB by young people or adults. Other behaviours may be judged by adults to be inherently harmful or inappropriate due to concerns about risk (e.g., online sexual behaviours like nude image sharing or consumption of pornography), while age-related capacity dimensions vis-à-vis sexual consent mean that certain acts are legally prohibited for young people regardless of context (e.g., statutory rape, image-based harassment and/or abuse).

## Skills for healthy relationships

An overly legalistic or categorical approach to addressing HSB may not adequately capture the cultural nuances of young people's experiences and may be overly focused on a deficit-model of relationships. Department for Education guidance for RSE (DfE, 2019) stresses the importance of young people understanding healthy relationships, suggesting a positive orientation to young people's participation rights regarding relationships. However, there is no specific definition given for what a healthy relationship looks like in practice, beyond a list of virtues and character attributed (e.g., self-respect, self-worth, honesty, integrity, humility, courage, etc.). This is also true of the Scottish Guidance for RSHP (2019). The guidance for Wales, meanwhile, goes beyond a focus on attributes and characteristics and states that relationships should be 'equitable and built on mutual respect.' It gives some guidance as to how to promote an understanding of the behaviours necessary to build and maintain healthy relationships, such as: 'the ability to act with kindness, empathy and compassion in interactions with others [...] an awareness of how to communicate wants and needs in a relationship and to begin to respect those of others.'

Conceiving of healthy relationships beyond just virtues and character traits entails a focus on the attitudes, skills and literacy needed for healthy relationships, which can be practiced and developed by young people. It also means that the social and cultural norms that impact young people's expectations for and

conduct within relationships can be addressed. Coercive and controlling behaviours can, for example, be accepted as part-and-parcel of a 'normal' heterosexual relationship, rather than as abuse (Abbott, Weckesser and Egan, 2021). Young people often associate jealousy and possessiveness as symptomatic of the perceived depths of a partner's feelings and misread controlling behaviours as 'caring' (Barter et al. 2009). Jealousy is often talked about as not only symbolic of 'love', but as a necessary demonstration for such feelings. In a Welsh study, while young women were able to demonstrate a zero-tolerance attitude towards abuse in theory when completing an attitudinal questionnaire, when interviewed about their own relationships, this did not seem to transfer to their lived experiences (Davies, 2019). Unlike in adult cases of intimate partner violence, it is not uncommon in teenage relationships for abuse to take place in public spaces in full view of peers which adds an extra social dimension to these issues (Davies, 2019).

## Inclusive sexual citizenship

A conceptualisation of healthy relationships starts with the foundations of socio-emotional skills and literacy needed to engage with others. York, MacKenzie and Purdy (2021) discuss the idea of a 'sexual citizen.' They advocate for young people's rights and need for support in developing their skills and literacy around consent, respect and empathy in order to achieve a well-rounded sexual citizenship status. Sexual citizenship needs to also address gender and sexual diversity, rights and supports. Inclusive sexual citizenship aligns with Lloyd's (2019) emphasis on the *who* and *where* of HSB. Lloyd argues that it is important to avoid over-emphasising young people's agency and instead address the contexts that affect young people and how best to "create safety for them" within and across contexts (Lloyd, 2019, p.15). Doing so requires a skills- and strengths-based approach while recognising and addressing the wider cultures and contexts that shape young people's relationship practices and behaviours. Sexual citizenship is not, therefore, just an individual endeavour but contextually situated and reciprocal among young people.

An inclusive and contextualised approach to enabling and supporting young people's sexual citizenship conflicts with framings of youth sexuality as inherently problematic and young people's sexual behaviours as irresponsible and risky and, therefore, needing to be controlled or suppressed. These framings reduce the opportunity for young people to explore their sexuality and claim sexual autonomy, with implications both for their ability to develop positive and ethical relationships and for HSB. Adults – be they parents, educators, or others – need, ultimately, to acknowledge that young people's passage to adulthood is inevitable and will involve them making decisions about their bodies and relationships that may be discomforting for adults (Jackson and Scott, 2015). It is the duty of adults to provide young people with support, education and opportunities to navigate the transition smoothly, and tools to do so are outlined in sections 5 and 6 of this guidance.

## Trauma-informed response and prevention

A smooth transition requires a trauma-informed approach to prevention and response. Some participants discussed the need to safeguard all of those involved in and experiencing HSB, with several participants describing the young people as 'vulnerable' both preceding, during and following incidents and experiences of HSB. These perceptions may relate to the nature of the young people who come to the attention of adult authorities (i.e., relating to the identified risks and needs – see section 2) but also underscore the commitment participants expressed to enabling and supporting young people to have interactions, relationships and lives free from HSB, to experience healthy and positive relationships.

> *"People can go on to offend if they've had like a really traumatic life event. So, potentially, if they've had the death of like a loved one, maybe a parent, then actually, that grief can then lead to that behaviour... [try to identify whether] there could be any work done around potentially GP signposting... school signposting that... some sort of engagement with that person..." (Police, HHPU4)*

A DSL shared a story of a girl involved in HSB linked to challenging personal and home circumstances:

> *"…a year 11 girl who had mental health issues, had difficulty engaging with school, attendance was poor… came from a household of mental health, and mum had been sectioned… her older brother had significant mental health issues… she had been left in the house on her own while her mum went to Spain with her older brother… she was being paid through PayPal [to] send [illicit images of herself and other young people] …to make money to pay for food, because the mother had left her with insufficient funds when she went on holiday… so then she resorted to that as a method of making and making money."*

This DSL was concerned about the lack of action by services in this case:

> *"…the police were doing nothing… taking no further action… So, you've got a situation where there was someone being paid to send indecent images and they weren't going to do anything further… you left that girl having done with what she did, and it was up to the social worker to look at what support that young person was getting."*

The complexities of adequately and appropriately addressing the needs of young people involved in and affected by HSB, including as span the boundaries between 'perpetrator' and 'victim', are elaborated upon further in section 4.

## Gender and sexuality sensitive prevention and response

It is also important to address the gender- and sexuality-related dynamics of HSB. A gender- and sexuality-sensitive approach must avoid generalising about the nature of the problem or reifying gendered expectations of behaviour among young people. Instead, it is about identifying the ways that gender norms shape how behaviours are defined, interpreted and responded to. As such, it is necessary to address institutional and school cultures broadly. Extensive evidence shows that gendered dynamics of HSB can go unrecognised, unchallenged and unaddressed by staff in schools (Chambers, Tincknell and Van Loon 2004; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Martino, 1995; Meyer, 2008; Mishna et al., 2020; Office for Children's Commissioner, 2021; Pascoe, 2005; Renold, 2005; Stein, 1995; Wilson, Griffin and Wren, 2005). Young people's experiences of and involvement in HSB can be interpreted by adults in terms of gender norms and expectations (Mishna et al., 2020; Ringrose and Renold, 2010). Some behaviours can be trivialised or not recognised or responded to as abuse and those affected by or experiencing HSB can be blamed or held responsible.

Research in secondary schools in England has found that adults may hold sexist and homophobic attitudes and may be fatalistic about HSB as not preventable due to gender stereotypes (Firmin, 2019; Giltchrest and Zhang, 2023). Other studies likewise identify how schools often perpetuate gender and sexual norms and stereotypes rather than challenging them (Abbott, Ellis, and Abbott, 2015; Atkinson, 2018; Bragg et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2016; Renold, 2005; Ringrose and Renold, 2010); Horeck et al., 2023). Young people's experiences of sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic and sexual harassing behaviours in their school-based peer contexts can, furthermore, be impacted by gender inequitable policies and procedures within school (see Meyer, 2008).

Overall, HSB, and unhealthy relationships in general, are strongly linked gender norms and dynamics and addressing HSB requires a gender- and sexuality-sensitive framework (Keddie et al., 2023; Storr et al., 2022).

# 4. Preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour in schools: Current practice.

This section outlines participants' experiences of and perspectives on preventing and responding to HSB among young people, including regarding the aims, opportunities and challenges of intervening. There is acknowledgment in this section of how 'policing' may be formal and/or informal given, as outlined in sections 1 and 2, how HSB was deemed to range along a continuum encompassing acts of varying levels of seriousness and (il)legality, with different underlying causal and explanatory factors and vulnerabilities, risks and needs of those involved and affected by HSB.

As context, there are debates in academic and applied fields about whether police should be involved in schools at all. There has been extensive discussion in the US context about the risks that police involvement in schools may over-extend surveillance of young people, particularly to the detriment of minoritised and disadvantaged young people (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2021) with some evidence of this regarding policing in schools in England (e.g., Henshall, 2018; Joseph-Salsbury, 2021) whereby police involvement in schools may be targeted particularly at schools with existing issues and so may result in higher rates of detection and, in turn, criminalisation and damage to trust (Gaffney, Farrington and White, 2021). However, a review of school-police partnerships found that in England, there may be more of a prevention and student safety-oriented than is the case in the US which may improve trust and perceptions of credibility and legitimacy regarding the police among young people, although more evidence is required of this potentiality and how best to achieve it (Bradford and Yesberg, 2019).

Overall, this section of the guidance identifies that police involvement in schools may be beneficial, including regarding building relationships with young people who may distrust police, so long as police are trained effectively, the roles of the police are established and agreed upon, there are clear protocols and sufficient funding and resource in place for a holistic partnership and multiagency approach (see Briers, 2003; Gaffney et al., 2021; Trotman and Thomas, 2016).

**Opportunities of policing HSB in schools:**

- Provision of education about topics young people are interested in and need to know about (definitions of abuse, legal rights and responsibilities, realities of the justice process, scope of the justice process).

- Relationship building with the police (including regarding safeguarding and perceptions of legitimacy.

- Partnership working as part of a 'public health approach' to HSB.

- Educating school staff about what constitutes abuse and illegal sexual behaviours.

- Potentially – young people being deterred from engaging in HSB.

**Risks or challenges of policing HSB in schools:**

ï  Overly legalistic framing of nuanced complexities e.g., regarding consent

ï  Substitute for comprehensive and holistic *relationship* education that addresses skills and social norms

ï  Damage to rapport with young people and, in turn, willingness to report among young people e.g., through emphasising illegality of sexual behaviour (like image sharing) and making young people feel the police are there to punish rather than protect.

ï  'Suited and booted' – intimidating both for 'innocent' young people and for those suspicious of or with negative experiences of the police

ï  Over-promising or lack of transparency regarding the realities of the justice system

ï  Difficulties in whether you are 'friend' or 'foe' (maybe different roles at different times/with different young people?)

## Police involvement in preventative education

Education designed to address HSB focuses mainly on what constitutes HSB (e.g., categories of abuse and harm); definitions of and skills for consent; traits and behaviours that comprise healthy and unhealthy relationships; and online sexual behaviours, among other topics.

There were various kinds of education referred to by participants regarding police involvement in education. They mentioned Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) / Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons; assemblies; and targeted group and one-to-one work with young people within school environments. These interventions may be delivered as part of the planned curriculum or as part of remedial responses to incidents.

Participants had perspectives on if and how police should be involved in education across these methods and contexts. Local Education Authority (LEA) decision-making in Surrey has led to reduced involvement of police in education in schools because:

· Teachers are meant to be delivering the statutory RSE curriculum and so should be covering the topics.

· Police may not have the requisite skills or approach required for a holistic approach to educating about healthy relationships (which is a stated objective of Surrey LEA).

· Education is best delivered by school staff because young people have an existing relationship with their teachers and are more likely to trust them, including if they need to make disclosures, compared to a police officer who they do not know. Such teachers were also deemed to be more likely to be able to pick up on any issues affecting the young people:

*"…if you want really good quality lessons, then that should be… [with] trusted adults that children know… I'm going to see that child at the end of this lesson, you can only see trauma or possible trauma if you know those children well. They need to talk that through with someone they trust. That dialogue should be, in my opinion, with a trusted adult that children see regularly. [Police] don't know those children. So, you don't know when you mentioned perhaps rape or sexual assault, that there's suddenly a change of behaviour in a child in that class." (Surrey LEA)*

Attendees at the regional police CPD session: 47% stated that current education on healthy relationships and HSB is 'somewhat effective', with 28% stating 'highly effective' and 25% stating 'not at all effective'

Yet, young people participating in the project described sometimes finding teacher-delivered education unengaging and unhelpful in addressing HSB, consistent with the extensive evidence base on young people's perceptions and experiences of RSE (see Pound et al., 2016, 2017; SafeLives, 2022):

*"it's not even that there'll be [students] laughing at the subject, but they'll just be talking… about something completely different. And don't get me wrong, I've been there like sat in the back. But it's normally because there's a subject on the screen that I'm like, I don't wanna talk about that, like, especially like, from personal experience going through what I went through. I don't want to have my form tutor telling me about something I've been through" (Domestic Violence Ambassador)*

*"I think they are giving us enough information… but some kids just don't take it in and just still go and do it I don't think it's ever gonna stop. I don't think there is a way to stop it. But people, some people take it in and think yeah, that is wrong. Other people will just like, whatever, and then go and do it" (Girls)*

External providers, including police, may be a valuable part of education, so long as it is delivered effectively:

*"I think it'd [education delivered by external providers] be taken a lot more seriously by like students because obviously then it's someone that they don't know it's someone that like, they will probably not see again like you won't see them for English for example. Whereas when it's your form tutor doing it, you have to see them all the time. So, I think it's almost a bit, it's almost a bit awkward. Like you don't want to be sat there." (DV Ambassadors)*

Schools themselves may want and value this input, including from police officers:

*"…to be honest with you, they want to see us… you speak to schools, yes, Surrey County Council don't want us in there because they're like, oh, you're not PSHE accredited… However, when you speak to DSLs in the schools, when you speak to their students, they want to see us." (Police, YEO2)*

*"…hearing it from someone who's not your teacher [can be effective]. You know, one moment I am telling them off because of their behaviour, the next minute, I'm giving them praise, the minute after that I'm teaching Business Studies, then I'm on duty… I'm a face they see every single day… the narrative I'm giving to them about keeping themselves safe and their relationships… they're not going to pay attention to me when I talk about that, because I'm not interesting… they need to have that exposure to different people [including police]." (Teacher)*

While Surrey LEA was concerned about trust and disclosures, a police officer (YEO4) said they have found that following interactive PSHE lessons they have delivered in schools, there has been "a lot of kids… [coming] up afterwards and speaking to us individually about things…". It may be the case, therefore, that the matter is less whether police should be involved, but what an effective partnership approach to education would look like and how to ensure consistency and alignment between police, school and LEA aims and objectives for preventing HSB and supporting young people to have healthy and positive relationships.

From the prevention perspective, there was a suggestion by police that they may be better trained and knowledgeable than teachers to identify concerning behaviours among young people through proactive educational inputs:

> "…if you've got a police officer in a classroom full of children and you know certain things that you're looking out for because you deal with coercive controlling behaviour. You deal with suspects and offenders; you deal with victims of the content that you're delivering. If somebody asks you a specific question, or their mannerisms, or their behaviours… I think they are more likely to see signs and see behaviours… it isn't all about talking at people." (YEO1)

This officer felt that:

> "…teachers know, to a certain extent, certain things to look out for. But then there are other things that they won't they don't have investigative minds… whereas police… somebody tells you something, you kind of like, okay, well why have they said that? …I don't think a teacher will probe as much as what a police officer would do."

There was some concern among police that, notwithstanding the statutory RSE curriculum, the topics may be being taught by teachers who are not experts:

> "I've been in schools where you get the Maths, Music, French teachers talk about [PSHE], not their expertise. [Are they] being trained and qualified? …if they've had no training… you're setting them up to fail… that can lead [young people] into huge trouble for the rest of their lives… around sex and the law, it will affect you, especially if you're a victim, offender…" (YEO3)

A teacher noted the issues around training and related to this resource constraints:

> "…they advocate having RSE teachers who are properly trained, and that's great… But then also, you can't staff it… we haven't got the funding. Do I buy an RSE teacher, or do I get a Maths teacher in… that then means… the quality of RSE in this school probably isn't as great as it would be if I had a professional who's been trained and has had, you know, got the qualification and the rest of it."

A police officer acknowledged that some topics or issues may be relatively "low-level" for police, such as underage sexual activity between "obviously consenting individuals". They said that even so, it is still:

> "…important for them [young people] to hear it from a police perspective, because at the end of the day, it is a criminal offence… it does kind of confirm that and maybe is a bit more hard-hitting come from a police officer than your teacher…" (HHPU2).

This officer felt that when education "comes from the police directly" it can reinforce any messages given by teachers: "I think there's definitely more… of an onus on the fact that, actually, maybe the teachers are telling the truth… it's upper level when it comes from the police themselves."

There was not, therefore, a desire among police to supplant teacher-delivered inputs, but instead to complement them as part of a partnership approach. There was a corresponding concern about police being used to cover, in entirety, a particular topic, such as consent or sexual image sharing. Instead, police typically wanted to play a role alongside "other experts" with the police explaining "the law… our area of specialty… if someone reports something, actually, this is what the police do" (YEO3). It has been identified in a review of police collaborations with schools that any police involvement should be part of a planned and embedded approach with police not being used in ad-hoc ways but instead both police and teachers receiving the training required for ongoing partnership working (O'Connor, 2010).

From the perspective of YEO3, a partnership approach can help with "breaking down those barriers, gaining trust and confidence within police…". Another officer felt similarly:

> "…what I used to think the youth engagement role was, we would go into schools, and we would talk on the offences side of things, and what could happen and how that affects people… I'm

> *still of the belief that I think that is something that needs to be done in conjunction with our partners. I don't think it should just be solely on one individual." (YEO1)*

The need for a holistic partnership approach was outlined here regarding education on consent:

> *"…consent is about, you know, if you want yes or no type of thing… very, very black or white… but actually, there's lots more intricacies around that… that's not a law thing… That's a relationship thing. Can that be taught? Yes, it could be. It's not easy…it needs the teachers, experts in those type of areas to be able to do that work with young people… quite a lot of it is concentrated on [whether or not the person is] breaking the law [and if not] … What's wrong with it? … [but just because it hasn't] broken the law doesn't mean to say it's right." (YEO3)*

A partnership approach needs to be aligned and consistent, which, in turn, requires police and schools to be aware of what each other are saying and doing with young people:

> *"I think we should be working in partnership with each other… the teachers are in there with us… a session where the teachers are doing most of it and then we come in for 15 minutes at the end and deliver the policing side… As long as we're all giving the same message. And I think that's where it falls down. We're not consistent… at the moment, we don't know what people do and don't know. So, you literally have to go into the very beginning of what they think is right and what they think is wrong and what they have been told because we don't know." (Police, YEO3)*

For YEO3, education should not just be about conveying information about the law but also *"coupled with skill development… the law gives you information, but giving them skills… is really, really difficult."* For example, regarding consent:

> *"How do you say no? …it's an easy word, isn't it? No [it isn't], all sorts of different circumstances will affect how you would say that… getting them [young people] to try things out in a safe place… I could use this tactic…"*

There were mixed feelings among non-police and non-school participants. While not anti-police in school per se, some felt other professionals are better placed to provide the education. Police in school delivering education was described by an online safety expert as *"very 'police-y'; generally, it's very don't do this don't do that or you'll end up getting arrested."* There was concern that this creates an environment where young people already think they are in trouble and are there to be told off rather than to be engaged with the topic. This view was reiterated by the senior practitioner at a child protection charity regarding the format and style of delivery:

> *"I certainly don't think they should have a role that is speaking at assemblies, I mean everything we are hearing from young people in our work… is what young people want is to be able to talk about these kind of issues in, you know, safe spaces within the classroom in small groups, where there's not a didactic, kind of educational approach,"*

Participants typically wanted the role of the police in school to be an opportunity to build a positive supportive presence whereby rather than providing lessons *"about knife crime about children in hoodies,"* they instead take time to build relationships within the school community. This approach was referred to as lower case – small 'p' – policing. This was particularly emphasised around working in primary school and is returned to further below regarding relationship-based practice by police in schools and, as suggested by O'Connor (2010) needs to address differences in perceived credibility of police among cohorts of young people.

## Format of educational interventions

From the perspective of the teacher below, it is important to tailor the approach to the needs of the young people and the nature of the issue being addressed, but also the practicalities of scheduling and delivering the intervention:

> *"…when they're [the police] working one-on-one with a child, it's because a specific need has been identified… that work happens in a very precise way for the needs of that child… If they're coming in to deliver information, sharing sessions or awareness in the kind of sessions with children, then assemblies and classroom-based assemblies are better because schools try to logistically plan for them to come in… you can do one year group in one hour. Job done, move on… providing they're delivering it in a way that's appropriate for their target audience."*

The style of delivery of educational interventions, whether proactively as part of the school curriculum or in response to specific concerns or incidents, is important to get right and the approach needs to be different depending on whether it is targeted or universal:

> *"[it is important to] understand the difference between what I call universal education and targeted interventions, because we get schools quite often contact us and say, this has happened… we want you to come in and do some work on it here… can you come and do an assembly? Okay, but what is actually the problem? Who is it? …should it be that, actually, I'm speaking with the young people, whether it's a group for two, one, four about it, rather than do a whole assembly to say 150, or a class lesson? …it's a different way of teaching or communicating it because if it's a direct intervention, to me, that's one thing, but a universal thing is another." (Police, YEO3)*

As noted above, the senior practitioner at a child protection charity was concerned that assemblies may not be effective and may inhibit reporting among potentially affected young people, for example when addressing topics like sexual image sharing (or 'sexting'):

> *"…we still see situations happening in schools were, you know, the idea about prevention, in terms of sexual behaviour issues, is bringing in a police officer at an assembly to talk to everyone about 'sexting', still using that language and pointing out how illegal it is… it means that, that 13-year-old who's just sent an image to the 13-year-old boyfriend, and he's already starting to think, actually, was that a good idea, and what's going to happen when the relationship ends, they're not going to be able to then go and have a conversation with an adult about this, because they're going to immediately assume, first of all, that they're going to get into lots of trouble. And also, they're probably going to assume that their digital devices are going to be taken away from them. So, they're just not going to do it."*

This participant said that smaller groups where young people can actively participate, and adults can offer relevant and helpful guidance are likely to be more effective:

> *"…everything that we're hearing from young people, certainly in our work… is what young people want is to be able to talk about these kinds of issues in, you know, safe spaces within the classroom in small groups, where there's not a didactic, kind of educational approach… [with] adults providing… ideas and… feedback that help people navigate this kind of new landscape that they're in."*

A police officer felt similarly about assemblies and that targeted, two-way engagement with young people is more effective:

> *"I don't think big assemblies with police attending is particularly the way forward and it's something that I've always tried to avoid… it'll miss so many people… It has to be small*

*groups and low-key targeted specific themes… build a relationship up whereby you're going in regularly and talking about different things… important to me [is] how I speak to young people and therefore then how they communicate back to me… How can we make things better… from a policing point of view… what's the messages that we are saying? How could we say it better? That [would encourage them to] actually come forward? What would stop them sharing an image? …really letting the young people speak to us and give us the information instead of us thinking that we know and telling them." (POLIT)*

As did another officer:

*"I don't like assemblies, because you cannot target the audience. You've got some people in there that are really vulnerable, and you say the wrong thing… then you've got others in there who are, like, not listening… So, I like to do smaller group work, or specifically one-to-ones, to be honest, because that's where we get the most interaction and it works." (YEO4)*

On the other hand, another officer felt that even though assemblies may not be ideal, they are a way of reaching a large number of young people:

*"…you don't have to lecture them or anything like that, but they may take away a snippet of information that will prevent them from committing that offence or they may turn around and give you some intel [intelligence about potential HSB]… they might tell you that it's happened to them… it's just about having those open conversations… whether that be in an assembly or PSHE format… there needs to be something… it's really important." (YEO2)*

Overall, it seemed that there may be a tension between ideal practice and what is deemed practical with some less-than-ideal inputs still holding some value depending on how and for what purpose they are delivered. There is, therefore, a broader issue of objectives and skills regarding police-delivered inputs in schools beyond just whether they should be present or not.

## Educating about gender-based violence and VAWG

There was some belief among participants that HSB and related topics are often framed and addressed in gendered terms within a lot of education in schools. For example:

*"…quite a lot of these gendered social scripts that we use quite a lot with the education that we provide for young people reinforces that boys are the rapist and girls are the victims." (Teacher)*

As discussed in previous sections, while it is important to identify and address the gendered nature of a lot of HSB, it is necessary for this education not to essentialise about gender and to address other intersecting factors to ensure it captures and tackles the diversity of experiences among young people.

There is also the risk of intervening with girls identified as vulnerable to abuse in ways that imply that they are responsible for identifying and acting upon abuse and that do not include boys as either at risk of behaving abusively or experiencing abuse themselves.

In one school, a select group of girls had undergone a 'healthy relationships' intervention [the girls who participated in a focus group for this project]. They said that they valued the intervention, stating that they now feel:

*"…like I would recognise [an unhealthy or abusive relationship] more… and I would, like, know what it is and, like, have a good understanding of it."*

*"I can spot like, when something's not right, in a relationship, like with my friends, or something. Or when my friends are, like, unhappy and stuff."*

There was some suggestion that they would be more open about any experiences they were troubled by:

> "I talk more to my mum about stuff now… Before [the group] I didn't really, I didn't really want to talk to her about stuff. But now… I just talk to her about anything, and she would just listen."

As outlined in previous sections, these girls were aware that boys may experience abuse, including from girls. They felt that boys may benefit from, albeit not necessarily engage with, this type of intervention, perhaps because of perceived stigmas in male peer groups that may inhibit openness about the topic among boys:

> "I don't know if they would talk about stuff. I don't think they will talk or take it seriously… Because if a boy got say, like, sexually abused, or whatever, and then they went and told their mates then… maybe they will say that they're like, weak or something… I think boys would probably only like it because, I guess, of getting out of school."

This perspective involves a homogenisation of boys through gender norms whereby all boys are assumed to have the same identities, perspectives and experiences. Perhaps aware of this complexity, the girls also felt that the interventions may be helpful in raising awareness among boys about these problematic norms, and about the inability to report sexual violence themselves.

The gendered framing of needs and experiences with HSB troubled some participants. The senior practitioner at the child protection charity felt that a different approach is required:

> "…gender-based violence is actually a men's issue, not a women's issue… this isn't an explicit criticism of the kind of messaging that colleagues are providing in schools. But I think there is something about engagement of men and indeed, male practitioners engaging with men and in some of these issues, and indeed, male only spaces, spaces to kind of explore some of these things and to begin to unpack what masculinity means nowadays, and indeed, kind of, where vulnerability sits… we can acknowledge vulnerability as part of masculinity at a time where masculinity is changing dramatically, for a whole host of cultural and economic reasons."

A more nuanced approach to the way that gender inflects involvement in and experiences of HSB may also help in shifting focus from a risk and harm 'deficit' model of young people's relationships to also encompassing healthy and positive relationships. The young people's remarks often implied a predominant focus on the negative aspects of relationships. For example, when asked about what they want from education, there was a notable emphasis on prevention of harm and little mention of positive rights:

> "How to notice the signs of like, when you if you've got like a gut feeling that you can be like, okay, this doesn't feel right, like where to go? Or what to do? Because I think that's the case with a lot of people is that they don't know where to go." (Domestic Violence Ambassador)

> "Spot the toxic relationship or something that isn't good? How to cope with them, how to cope with situations… about sending stuff [e.g., nude images] and saying stuff like not to do it, why not to do it." (Girls)

The need for more positive approaches to addressing HSB was endorsed by some adult participants, including police, for example, regarding the need to educate:

> "…not just [about] the negative side of [sex and relationships] …you don't need to teach them the horrific side of things. You just need to say, this is what it should look like in a nice environment, if you like, and, and bring the harsher stuff in at a later date if it's needed or required… I think education around that would be beneficial." (HHPU1)

It was this orientation to emphasising healthy and positive relationships as a way of tackling HSB and supporting young people's socio-sexual development that significantly shaped some participants' concerns about police involvement in education and Surrey LEA policy in this regard.

Yet, as discussed, police and other participants felt that police involvement can be effective, depending on how it is done.

## Police role in schools and police-youth relations

There were mixed ideas about the formal and informal roles of police in schools, seemingly related to participants' objectives for police presence in schools. For example, the police participants focusing on gathering intelligence were in favour of going to schools in plain clothes and engaging in 'street-smart' types of conversation with young people (akin to 'relationship-based practice' - see below). Officers aiming to identify and address vulnerabilities and incidents wanted to have uniformed officers present and visible in schools and among young people. There are implications of these approaches for engagement and relationships between police and young people:

*"...if you're responding to an incident. I think if you turn up in uniform, people see, people naturally believe that because you've got a uniform on that you can look after them and safeguard them. So, if someone had just been a victim of an assault in a school, when you turn up in uniform, I think that they will believe that you can help them a lot more. Whereas if you didn't turn up in uniform, they probably possibly couldn't see that. What could you do for me? I want a proper police officer... it's in the mind" (Police, HHPU3)*

More visible presence was also deemed to be important from a proactive perspective:

*"...they [police] don't necessarily have to speak about crimes, they don't have to chastise any children, that's not their role there. It's just a visible presence, then the kids will get used to seeing it and I'd know all of these children. So, if I saw them out in the high street, that I'd be able to identify the troublemakers through CCTV, they'd say hello." (Police, HHPU3)*

However, both the young people and some of the adult participants were aware that police presence in schools may be intimidating and some young people may have had negative previous experiences with police or otherwise may not trust them. For example, the Domestic Violence Ambassadors taking part in the research, who described having extensive traumatic histories with and connected to police, said:

*"...I was always told that the police are bad... never tell them anything. Never trust them... so, it was like terrifying. Especially when you're like in year eight... like you're tiny and there's like six-foot police officers in uniform... absolutely terrifying and I was like, oh my Lord."*

*"... even if you've never had that [previous negative experiences or messaging regarding police], I think you'd still be terrified. I think it almost when you're sat there, you always feel like a criminal. Like you feel guilty and yeah, and I'm like I haven't done anything, but I feel really guilty... feels like you're telling me off or something..."*

There were mixed views among the girls as to whether police should be present or not:

*"I would rather police not be here."*

*"I think they should like come in like maybe like I think they should come in for this like one lesson."*

*"They came in and someone had had something done to them that no one knew about. The police brought it up, it could trigger someone... or it could give them flashbacks, or it could make them like get like anxiety or something. Or maybe it will be like being quite upsetting... they might feel a bit embarrassed."*

A teacher said that police may not be the "solution" because "you [referring to young people] feel scared, you feel nervous... you certainly aren't going to listen to them because of those feelings..." which, they felt, is exacerbated when the style of delivering is not "engaging" which, they attributed to a lack of training:

> *"…they don't really think about who their target audience is… they might be doing PowerPoints… the kids often will be very good at asking questions at the end of it. But… they're [the police] not delivering in a way that children are going to be properly engaged in listening."*

Police officers were aware of problems with low levels of trust and perceptions of legitimacy among some young people in particular:

> *"…you're the middleman in the middle of it, really, because you want the best for this young person. But ultimately, if you're constantly fighting a losing battle, because the negative stuff that's happening [being reported about police] in the media, and then you're instantly judged"* (YEO2)

However, police presence, when done well, was identified as potentially helpful in overcoming a lack of trust in police among young people, seemingly when involving 'relationship-based practice' models of policing (see below). A teacher praised their local police team as "amazing… lovely very kind, thoughtful, helpful… they don't come across as threatening or aggressive."

Referring to police involvement in educational interventions in schools, an officer acknowledged that there are "risks… in those sort of lessons… it's finding the balance of being informative, but not scaring people…" (HHPU2).

When able to overcome barriers and engage effectively with young people, police felt that being in schools can be valuable for the insights and intelligence gained. This officer felt that the "intel" obtained through informal interactions with young people can be "priceless":

> *"They'd be such a valuable source of information because the kids would just talk, and they wouldn't know what they were saying. And they then tell us that it would be absolutely priceless… the kids will enjoy telling you what they've heard… it would seem as if you're just having a joke or the laugh with these kids. But the more you did that, the more they spoke. And it was really interesting. You kind of play the role of Colombo, just having a silly conversation with them, but you're just getting information. That seems to work well."* (HHPU3)

It was not just about the benefits to police in terms of information/intelligence gathering. There was also an evident commitment among police to empowering young people, including those who may not be aware that their experiences may constitute HSB:

> *"…It's just about trying to make them aware that they have a voice. And if something doesn't make them feel right inside them, they need to tell us, and then we can sort of look into it."* (YEO2)

YEO2 also felt that engaging with young people and building relationships may require alternative or additional approaches to a more visible and enforcement-oriented approach to policing: *"…you have to have a certain way about you… obviously don't go in uniform… you have to know what's going on, with regards to what's trending with regards to slang and terminology and different things like that."*

The duality in the role of police, regarding enforcement and protection, has implications for the nature of the police role in schools and the perceived need to distinguish officers involved in longer-term relationship building (i.e., the youth engagement officers) from those involved in investigation and enforcement (see also findings by Broll and Howells (2021) regarding the different aspects of the policing role in schools based on a small-scale study conducted in Canada):

> *"… we have our youth intervention officers… their predominant role is to go in and educate… but… if someone's… committing an offence, a child is committing an offence, nine times of out 10, then they're not going to be dealt with by the friendly youth intervention officer… they're going to be dealt with by someone else."* (HHPU2)

> *"…if there's any actual crimes or offences that take place, we, as a youth engagement officer, don't necessarily take the lead… the investigation will get looked into and dealt with by a separate officer, and then I or my colleague, we will then get involved at the point of the*

> *conclusion of that investigation... we will assist the officer in terms of any support or background history or if we've got a good relationship with the family. But in terms of investigation, we wouldn't necessarily get involved. Because if we know we're then going to be working with that young person, what we don't want to do is then be seen to be the 'bad cop'... Because we want that young person to open up to us, we want them to trust us." (YEO1)*

> *"...we YEOs, we don't investigate the crimes, so we will take a report and then it will get passed on to another agency, another team. And that's so that we don't tarnish our rapport and our engagement with our young people..." (YEO2)*

The issue of setting boundaries and expectations through which young people can understand that police have different roles and duties was emphasised by participants. It was also deemed important to maintain the balance between being a friendly and trustworthy entity and at the same time an authoritative figure that can establish order. For example:

> *"...striking that balance of being approachable, but also... if they are committing an offence that you will deal with them... it's a tricky thing to get right... being approachable, but also being strict enough that they're not going to take advantage or think that they can take advantage." (HHPU2)*

An officer felt that even when balancing enforcement with relationship-based practice, they endeavour to retain a commitment to diversion and support even when having to address "consequences" with young people:

> *"...the police have very many, lots of different hats. We're not just there for criminal justice, we're there to help support young people with times of crisis and to make sure they know where to go for help and support... but they need to understand that actions have consequences... [but] my intention is to help more people because I'm trying to steer these people away from criminality and away from getting involved in the police." (YEO2)*

The dual roles can be complementary, with some suggestion that police can play a role in prevention of criminality, including as pertain to HSB both among young people and, ultimately, adults, through police involvement in education and through informally responding to 'lower level' incidents early on:

> *"It would help the police... if we can try and stop this sexual behaviour at a young age, because then we'll get less offenders" (HHPU4)*

> *"Police are very much reactive... dealing with the aftermath. Of course, that's generally policing. But we also now understand prevention is far better." (POLIT)*

Early intervention may also take place proactively, with an officer reflecting on previous practice of working with year 6 pupils in primary school as they transition to secondary school. This officer felt that this age group can be receptive to police messaging and that engagement with them can help in building relationships for the future:

> *"...year seven, particularly in September, no kids are going to want to talk to us, then they've just gone to a new big school, they're trying to prove themselves, you're not going to get the level of communication from them that you get hitting them in year six, when they're confident they're the biggest ones in the school. They're happy moving on. And then they're the little fish and they're a bit scared, and they don't want to say anything." (YEO4)*

If and when incidents arose, this officer then had the existing engagement with the young people to refer back to:

> *"...the best thing for the next two years was being able to go in and go, you met me like a year ago, two years ago, we had this discussion, what's going on? ...you knew everyone had that base level of understanding... we could all pull back to the fact that you knew you shouldn't be doing this, and this was wrong."*

YEO4 also felt that such early intervention can help prevent harmful attitudes, which they see in older young people, from developing and entrenching to begin with:

> "They [older young people] think it's the norm, you know, my mate does it [sharing nude images], and I'll go and send that. And a lot of it, as well as girls saying to other girls, why aren't you doing it? I'm doing it, kind of thing… that's why if the message isn't there at the beginning… we haven't had that consistent thing where we can say that that's the problem."

From this officer's perspective and experience, it does not need to be extensive engagement but "quick… that's the key, because their attention span is minimal… they liked the question and answers at the end… keep it short… then they remember it." This officer's perspective indicates a considered and reflective approach to understanding and responding to the needs of young people in an effective way.

## Policing to deter and instil fear and relationship-based practice to build rapport, trust and dialogue

There was some belief among police that there is a need to increase the fear of police action among young people as a way of deterring harmful or criminal behaviour. For example:

> "I think that our kids aren't scared of the police anymore… there's no respect there… most kids have no regard or have no concerns about the police and aren't scared by the prospect of getting into trouble or being spoken to by police…" (HHPU2)

Mostly, however, deterrence and punitive-based approaches were considered problematic by participants because young people involved in HSB may feel unable to engage and speak openly while those experiencing or witnessing HSB may be concerned about reporting due to fears of incriminating their peers and, in the case of online HSB, themselves.

A police officer (POLIT) felt that just emphasising the illegality of particular behaviours can make "victims… go to ground." The senior practitioner at the child protection charity compared such approaches to:

> "…scared straight programmes in the 80s and 90s around trying to stop kids taking drugs… [whereby] police officers go into schools fully uniformed and then having a script… where they talk about the… dangers of drug use… these programmes did not have an impact… and may lead to more kids taking drugs, rather than less."

The online safety expert described the alienating nature of some approaches to policing in schools:

> "…generally, it's very don't do this, don't do that or you'll end up getting arrested, which isn't really much of a deterrent for young people. It will be for some, but for most, it'll be like, yeah, whatever, whatever… I see more negatives than positives, just because their [police] view is law and order… that's not always the best way to speak to children and young people about these sorts of things, which are… sometimes confusing for them, sometimes very sensitive."

This participant described their approach to working with police to co-deliver education in schools on online sexual behaviours, with the aim being for young people to feel that:

> "…if I come forward, this isn't going to be the end of the world… people are going to support me. People don't want to criminalise me because I've done these things, or I've sent these images, or I've touched this person… I think that when you can talk to young people in a way that they can sit… process the information…"

There was some agreement with such objectives among police. For example, an officer felt that it is important that young people "feel comfortable enough" to report what are oftentimes "very personal… matters without fear of… judgment or reprisals… being in trouble because you've sent you're 16-year-old boyfriend a picture that has then escalated into something way more than you ever thought it would" (HHPU2).

Several officers emphasised the need for 'relationship-based practice', with one officer stating that "you end up being a police officer and a social worker..." (HHPU3).

> "...we're not just there to punish people. And if you teach people from a young age to be afraid of a police officer, they're never going to come to us for help, are they? ...that's completely the wrong way to look at it. You need police officers to be approachable police officers... if you're walking down the street and a kid is in danger, or they're worried... you want them to come up to you and ask for help..." (HHPU1)

> "...I think having, like, a police officer, like linked to a school and, and like just somebody being, like, almost like a friendly face that you would be comfortable to go and talk to, I think would be massively beneficial..." (HHPU2)

> "I don't want someone to be fearful of me. If someone's got a problem, I want them to be able to come and tell me... that's why I chose to work with children. I like problem solving. I like to get deeper into the problem and help people. And don't get me wrong. If someone's committed a crime... if they do something in front of us, we will deal with them for it... [but] If we don't have relationships, we're not getting the intelligence. If we don't have relationships, we're not identifying those victims who are too scared to ring up and tell us things..." (YEO4)

> "[fear-based approach may result in young people] ... switching off... it's about having those conversations, and we've got to remember that unfortunately, some of those young people in the classroom are going to be victims... if we're scaring them and... shocking them ...I don't think it works. [instead] ...using good communication... to gain that trust and confidence within policing will change people's mindsets..." (YEO3)

There was some belief that young people and adults may have different perspectives. An officer described there sometimes being a "completely different dialogue" among young people and adults, which means that "the message is lost... kids become secretive" (POLIT). Another officer felt that it is important for adults to try to understand young people's perspectives, underscoring the emphasis on relationship-based practice:

> "It's really interesting to find, because teenage brains, they work hugely different to us as adults, what we want to think is they need to know and that that will dissuade them for doing might not be a complete opposite" (YEO3).

Building understanding and trust between young people and police through relationship-based practice was identified as requiring specific skills sets and outlooks:

> "...talk to them like a human being, and just speak on their level be whether you use your swear word, or whatever... I'm a human being, and I've got a sense of humour, you can take the piss out on me, I really don't mind... have a laugh about it." (HHPU2)

> "...making sure it's a safe environment for them to talk in. How to create that safe environment... handling tricky questions... you don't want them to not want to ask, but you don't want them to say something in a lesson in front of 29 other kids that all of a sudden... they get bullied for..." (YEO3)

It is also often a long-term endeavour, especially when dealing with young people from difficult backgrounds:

> "...if you're dealing with somebody that is very streetwise, and they've got a lot of ACEs, the chances are, it's going to take a very, very, very long time, for any form of trust to be built. And they might not necessarily talk to you like the first, second, third, fourth, fifth time, it might take, like two months, three months. So, you've got to have a lot of time and patience, ...particularly if that child has had a lot of trauma, to have any sort of trust." (YEO1)

There is an evident lack of resources and training for this role. An officer described their approach as "self-taught" but felt it is important to:

> *"…understand the barriers that are in place to stop us from engaging with these young people… what resources you have available… Back in the day that we've had more training from back then around stuff. But there are some people that would have come straight from response into this role who've had nothing… working with children, that is dangerous. Because…it's very easy to say the wrong thing." (YEO2)*

Even where police want to engage in relationship-based practice, however, they are still under safeguarding and reporting obligations depending on what young people may disclose, which may damage trust if not effectively conveyed to young people.

> *"You have a duty of care, but then you're trying to get information from them to support and point them in the right direction, but they might disclose something you have to report as a crime…" (YEO1)*

This felt that rigid policies and procedures in these regards can hinder relationship-based practice longer-term:

> *"…the policies and the procedures that you've got, but yet we're expected to work with these young people. Well, how can we work with these young people, which is why a lot of kids tend to open up more to targeted youth support than they do with the police." (YEO1)*

Police were acutely aware of the potential to irreparably damage their relationships with young people if young people feel "let down" or misled regarding these obligations. As a result, any objectives regarding intelligence or information gathering (see above) need to be carefully enacted as part of relationship-based practice, including regarding the need to avoid the (actual or perceived) over-surveillance of young people.

> *"You could lose so much if you try and be smart and lie to a child when they are vulnerable. So, you need to be transparent and honest and open… if they're not getting it from me, the kids just won't open up… So, you have to remain professional, but ensure you're not trying to deceive them…" (HHPU3)*

The teachers described a similar tension when wanting to be a safe space for young people, to talk openly but also being bound by safeguarding obligations. For example: *"I say, we always have to tell them that nothing can be kept secret… what do you because there's that idea isn't there that young people want everything to be kept confidential?"*

However, there was also recognition that young people may choose to disclose while knowing – or even hoping – that action is taken:

> *"But then on the other hand, there's this idea that some things are a cry for help… it's actually their way of saying, Yeah, help me I'm struggling, or there's something going on, to, to share with somebody. And it's identifying that or just being able to make them feel comfortable. So, they can share this listen, never, you know, obviously, judge or begin to be able to judge them for anything that's happened, but to pass it on, so they can help."*

A police officer made a similar point about disclosures:

> *"…if people are disclosing like sexual offences and sexual things that have been going on, they're obviously disclosing it to you. And they're telling you for a reason, in my mind, because if they didn't want anyone to know, they wouldn't say anything at all. So, then you've also got a question, well, why are they telling me that? Are they telling me it? Because they want me to take the decision out of their hands. And I'm making that decision as in, we've been made aware that this has happened. The victim isn't the person that's actually pursuing this. I'm pursuing it. They don't want me to talk to you. But I do want to talk to you." (YEO1)*

Safeguarding and reporting duties that are, therefore, an inherent issue. Instead, relationship-based practice seems to require openness and transparency about these duties between professionals and young people. It also must be rooted in long-term commitment to and sufficient training of

police officers to enact relationship-based practice in ways that is cognisant of and response to the contextual realities of HSB that young people are navigating and experiencing and, in turn, go beyond surveillance-oriented approaches (Lloyd et al., 2023).

## Responding to incidents and disclosures - Policing procedures, staffing delays and resource shortages, and delayed outcomes

Incidents may be reported or come to the attention of police via young people, parents/carers, DSLs or other school staff, or services like Children's Social Care.

*"...it's not always the young person saying this has happened... It's parents... or it is a disclosure within a school setting, potentially, to another young person that has been spoken to by the young person that has got into difficulties and that young person has reported it... there are many streams actually." (Police, POLIT)*

Participants described several challenges with responding effectively to incidents, pertaining to communication and information sharing between parties, the resources required for timely investigation and resolution, evidentiary requirements, and incongruence between the responses and educational messages conveyed to young people.

When asked, 39% of officers at the regional police CPD session selected 'limited resources/support services' as the primary challenge/barrier that they face when responding to allegations of HSB among young people; followed by 'lack of training or knowledge' (30%) and 'difficulties identifying/gathering evidence' (27%). Most of these officers felt it is important for police officers to receive specialised training in responding to HSB among young people (85% stated extremely important). Most selected 'collaborative partnerships with other services' as most needed to enhance the response of police officers to HSB among young people (64%), followed by 'specialised training' (24%). These concerns and perspectives are consistent with the interview data.

Police responses to incidents include:

- Informal discussions with or warnings for those involved by non-police authorities (i.e., dealt with 'in-house' in the school).

- Police investigation and evidence gathering to establish the scope and need for further responses.

- A formal policing response (caution, prosecution)

- An informal policing response e.g., an informal non-recorded warning or 'words of advice'.

- Referral to one or more statutory or non-statutory services/agencies (with or without any of the above formal or informal actions).

Analysis of Surrey Police incident data (quantitative and qualitative) indicates that most incidents reported to or identified by police result in No Further Action (NFA) - at least as far as formal police or criminal justice action is concerned - because of a lack of evidence, lack of victim support for further action and/or further action not being in the young people's best interests and/or the public interest. Even when the outcome is NFA, the police seemingly take informal action in many cases, for example offering 'strong words of advice' regarding the alleged behaviour, although there was little specific description of type of advice given and it cannot be established whether and how the messaging affects young people's attitudes or subsequent behaviour.

> *"...if there's evidence to support an investigation, but the victim doesn't want to pursue the allegation... if it is in the public interest to move forward with it, then the police nine times out of 10, we should be moving forward with it. If the victim is saying, you know, I want to record it, I want them to have... words given to them, but I don't actually want to get them into trouble and I'm not willing to provide a statement, then we're left with no choice [but for the formal outcome to be NFA]." (Police, YEO1)*

The issue of those witnessing or experiencing HSB being reluctant to report, to make a formal statement and/or to support formal police action relates to various factors.

Barriers to reporting and agreeing to make a statement among young people experiencing, witnessing or affected by HSB:

- Normalised forms of abuse and harassment (not recognised as harm)
- Lack of education about what constitute abuse/harassment (e.g., re image-based sexual abuse)
- Believe or expect that they will be blamed, punished or that no action will occur
- Concerns about safeguarding and confidentiality
- Shame and stigma
- Peer reactions and 'anti-snitch' cultures

*See section 5 for recommendations for overcoming barriers to reporting.*

Regarding, so-called 'anti-snitch' cultures in young people's peer contexts, young people said that:

> *"...it's not that they [people who witness HSB] don't care, but they just don't think that they should be involved because it's nothing to do with them or that they're scared of like the consequences of the what the student is going to do... there's so many people here that... would quite easily swing at someone if they found out someone reported them." (Domestic Violence Ambassador)*

> *"...some people are scared to go and write a statement or something. Because if someone finds out that you've written one, you will get called a snitch. Or be like, oh, yeah, don't trust them. Because they're going to get like people putting their stories [on social media] like, never trust this person..." (Girls)*

These concerns about the ramifications of 'snitching' have been found in other studies (e.g., Allnock and Atkinson, 2019; Lloyd and Walker, 2023). Given the social significance of police involvement in response to incidents, the girls participating in this project said that police attendance can attract a lot of attention among young people, potentially as a 'scandal' or something 'exciting':

> *"...people would start talking... oh, yeah, there's police at the school. What's happening? What's happening? Does anyone know? Stuff like that. And then if it was outside of school, I think it'd be the same because I would still go over and see what's happening."*

These dynamics intersect with social media whereby young people may post online about police attending:

> *"...it does get leaked ...they [young people] post a picture ...And then just everyone finds out and then everyone's asking ... What have you done? What's happened? What they say?" (Girls)*

While reluctant to report and be labelled a 'snitch', there were some punitive attitudes expressed by young people, which seemingly signified despondency and fatalism about ongoing experiences of HSB within their peer cultures. They seemed to want the behaviour to stop but lacked faith in adults and, therefore, expressed sentiments regarding wanting those involved in HSB to be excluded from school or otherwise punished with the aim of stopping or deterring the behaviour. These perspectives have been identified in other studies conducted by the research team (Setty and Dobson, 2022).

There is also an issue regarding the perceived proportionality of punishments, with some of those participating in the research stating that the use of similar punishments in school (e.g., isolation) in response to conduct that ranges in severity weakens the effectiveness and legitimacy of the response. Where interpreted as inconsistent with other school policies and procedures, the response further loses credibility, as suggested by the evidence on 'whole school approaches' to addressing HSB, which means that punishment is not viewed as proportionate to the degree of harm or as a means of changing behaviour.

> *"Like being when you're punishing someone, and you're just putting them in a room with like, 14 other people that, like, I just don't, I don't know. It doesn't sit right with me. Because… there's so many people in ER that have, like, either being caught vaping or being kicked out of their lesson or like, talking like, in no way do all three of those things sit on the same level and fit the same punishment" (Domestic Violence Ambassador)*

The 'zero tolerance' approach to HSB, advocated by government policy (see 'introduction to the guidance') may exacerbate issues connected to (dis)proportionality by not discerning abuse or having appropriate (distinguished) modes of response. On the one hand, some of the teachers interviewed for this project felt that they had effectively managed problems, for example sexist language, within school by being very clear about what is and is not acceptable and by implementing clear consequences for infractions. A teacher, for instance, stated that the school does not have a problem with social media influencer Andrew Tate because the boys are aware that it is unacceptable to refer to him or repeat any of his misogynistic or abusive claims within the school environment, and if they do, they will be shut down and/or punished.

Yet, it was apparent from young people – in this project and other studies – that HSB of various kinds can continue beyond the purview of adults. In the above example, it may be the case that some boys still endorse Andrew Tate and/or repeat his claims, but seek to avoid detection by adults because they know they will be punished. Punishment detection in this instance is not the same as genuine attitude or behaviour change.

Another example relates to IBSAH. Boys have become increasingly aware that non-consensual sharing of images of girls among the peer group may get them into trouble. Some boys have stated in research that they still continue to share the images but do so through 'showing' their friends the images on their phones rather than forwarding them so that they avoid creating a 'digital trail' and so reduce the likelihood of detection and punishment (Setty et al., 2022). Again, the abusive behaviour has not changed but has adapted in nature to the emphasis on zero tolerance and punishment.

Zero tolerance may also entrench the disinclination to report because of concerns among young people about getting peers into trouble and any social ostracism that may result (see Lloyd and Bradbury, 2022, for further discussion about the counterproductive consequences of zero tolerance approaches).

## Challenges and barriers to reporting and responding to online harmful sexual behaviour

As outlined in section 1, participants were alive to how the laws surrounding young people's online sexual behaviours predate the emergence of these behaviours and were designed to address adult offending against minors. For example, laws surrounding sexually explicit content were designed to prohibit adults from exposing children to the content and to prohibit adults from producing, storing and/or distributing illicit imagery of minors. These laws predate the emergence of smartphones and other networked communication technologies but are being applied to young people involved or affected by digital intimacies like sexual image sharing.

The legal context to young people's online sexual behaviours creates interlocking problems that relate to and exacerbate the challenges experienced with responding to HSB in general:

- There is a lack of space and professional ability or willingness to address consent and non-consent in young people's online sexual cultures via preventative education. This is because the emphasis remains on deterring young people from participating in practices like sharing images entirely rather than teaching them about the distinctions between consensual and non-consensual behaviours.

- Young people experiencing, affected by or who witness abusive, unwanted and non-consensual behaviour online may feel discouraged from reporting because they are concerned that they may implicate themselves or others in criminal activity.

Analysis of Surrey Police incident data suggests that, notwithstanding the educational messages conveyed to young people, most incidents of image sharing involving young people results in NFA and remedial educational interventions are sometimes delivered to deter young people from further engagement in image sharing. The focus on aggravated image sharing (see Wolak and Finkelhor, 2011) was noted by some officers who described a conflict between deterring image sharing and encouraging those experiencing abuse to come forward:

> *"…it's hard, because you want to say to them… it's not you taking that photo, it's not something that we're going to, nine times out of 10, be dealing with criminally, but the person that sent it on, you know, we're more likely to be dealing with that. Because you don't want them to then think, oh, I'll just, I'm not going to be in trouble, so I'll do whatever I want. But… I would imagine there probably are people [who experience HSB connected to image sharing] that wouldn't come forward… it is just trying to get the knowledge into them that actually, that shouldn't be a factor in not reporting something." (HHPU2)*

> *"…we'd look at their vulnerabilities and then look at the proportionality… Am I going to gain anything? Is it in the public interest to prosecute a 13-year-old child… who sent an image of their genitalia? …Everything would be recorded for continuity and safeguarding… and social services made aware. But… I can offer safeguarding and tell that child not to do it again and make them understand the reasons why without putting them through the court system…" (HHPU3)*

These examples suggest that the primary aim is to deter image sharing at source, by focusing on the negative consequences that may arise for young people. There seems to be a formalised approach to recording the incidents shaped by the context of the incident:

> *"…it depends on the kid… if it's a pattern of behaviour, if it's a first offence, usually what would happen is we would get involved quite early on, and we would then get all the kids involved along with the teachers. And initially, it would get recorded as a crime, and then everything would get deleted off the phone. We would make a crime report, it would all get written on the crime report. And it would all be dealt with, sort of, low level… it would all be based on education if it was the first offence, and then if that person continued, …then we would then obviously have to up what we were doing… depending on the content of what was on that phone, they would either then get referred to youth intervention, or if there was a significant amount, then potentially it could go to court… [although it] is very unlikely with a young person that it would get to court because of their age, and it'd be more likely that it would go to the youth intervention panel, and then they would make a decision on what would happen… then they would have to work with targeted support for a set period of time. If they refused to work with targeted support, it would then go back to the panel, and then it would get put before a court." (YEO1)*

This aim of addressing primary image sharing at source was apparent among many of the officers at the regional police CPD event, where 47% said that the most significant problem with image sharing among young people is 'primary image sharing', with 24% selecting 'non-consensual distribution of images', 15%

selecting 'non-consensual production of images (pressure, coercion, up-skirting, etc.)' and 12% selecting 'unsolicited image sharing/cyber-flashing (including dick pics)'. This emphasis on preventing primary image sharing marginalises the issue of consent and recommendations in section 5 in these regards are organised around the need to centre consent and prioritise harm reduction in this context.

## Informal and non-criminal justice action in response to incidents

The social and cultural factors underpinning a disinclination to report and a lack of perceived legitimacy and credibility may be further impacted by the nature of the subsequent policing process and the (actual or perceived) incongruence between educational messages imparted to young people and the 'reality' of the process, specifically regarding:

- What young people are being taught regarding the law in terms of categories of abuse compared to what happens when an incident is reported. Young people seem not to be being taught comprehensively about evidence-gathering and charge and prosecution processes. This incongruence may exacerbate a lack of trust in the process and overly categorical thinking about the veracity of allegations of HSB, with, potentially, claims made that individuals reporting HSB may have been 'lying' if there is no formal action taken following their allegation.

- What young people think and feel about the process (e.g., that nothing is being done particularly when there are delays and/or an outcome of NFA) versus what the police are doing 'behind the scenes' (often a lot of work gathering and assessing evidence and even if NFA, there will often be informal and/or wider remedial action taken, as evidence by Surrey Police incident data – see Appendix III).

- What police can do with the evidence available to them versus what schools, parents and young people may want the police to do or believe that they should do. Here, there may be misconceptions regarding what constitutes an illegal act and, therefore, a police matter and, related to the first point, misconceptions regarding evidentiary and children's and public interest requirements for formal action.

- The grey areas and blurred boundaries between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' categories, with 'victims' sometimes having vulnerabilities and behavioural patterns that cause adults to deem them also part of the problem and that may, in turn, hinder the response.

- The need for risk factors and ACEs for young people to be referred or accepted for services amid high service thresholds and professional judgments of risk and need.

- Lack of scope to address social and cultural dimensions of HSB incidents without the consent of relevant parties where there are not grounds for formal responses or referrals.

- Perceptions that those affected by HSB are being let down due to the emphasis on diversion of young people from the criminal justice system and, in turn, missed opportunities to intervene and address the behaviours of those involved in HSB. There is a question here regarding whether interventions have to occur formally through the CJS but given high service thresholds it seems to be case that meaningful interventions may often be being missed.

A police officer acknowledged how education about the law may not be adequately informing young people about the realities of legal processes:

*"…the law is what I call very black and white is or isn't, basically, but there's always a lot of what I will call grey areas around every circumstance and every circumstance will be different… for us in policing, we've got to prove beyond all reasonable doubt… quite often in instances of sort of sex offences it's one word against another… sometimes, we as the police may not help ourselves by saying, well, there's no further action: that says to people, well, nothing's happening. Actually, there could be other things that are going on in the background…we have got to be better at explaining I think to young people, but… if you've*

> got a lesson that's 45 minutes to an hour long, it sometimes becomes very difficult to go into all the intricacies…" (YEO3)

An officer spoke at length about the 'failures' of those reporting HSB due to these challenges:

> "What message do we give to young people? Because we keep saying, if this happens, you need to report and then they do report, and then nothing happens… that breaks their confidence that there's any point… do you say, don't bother reporting because nothing's going to happen? …miscommunication around the criminal justice process, what you can do evidentially or not, depending on what has been reported… they should be reporting it, but then there should be that… ongoing dialogue of you've reported this, and because of these reasons, is why we can't pursue it, or we need this information, or we're looking at this phone download." (HHPU4)

The long timescales involved in investigating and closing incidents, coupled with limited resources for mental health services, was identified as potentially triggering or exacerbating problems with mental health for those involved:

> "…when police do get involved, sometimes we can make things twice as bad. Because the victim doesn't want you to talk to them… they're trying to deal with it themselves in terms of they've safeguarded themselves. They've taken themselves out of the relationship, they've moved away, or they've done stuff. And yet, we then open up the can of worms again, and then everything starts all over again" (YEO1)

This officer described the pressure of getting decisions 'right' and safeguarding young people within this context of delays:

> "…it can't be a standard [approach]. This is what we're going to do every for every victim for every suspect, because it might not work and like you take into factors such as the risk and the harm, but the mental health side of things as well of the victim. You've got to remember everything we do… you are held accountable for those actions. So, if I then do something and make a decision, and then that person then goes and harms themselves or kills themselves as a result of… the decision that I've made, and I could have made a different decision based on the information I've got, then I'm going to be questioned and looked at." (YEO1)

Another noted that safeguarding of both the 'victim' and 'suspect' can be challenging:

> "That tricky stage of where potentially someone's been bailed for an offence. They've still got to go to school, they're still going to be educated. And that can be a real difficulty, again, for schools… [if the] victim is in the school as well as a suspect in a school. How do you manage that?" (YEO3)

As well as safeguarding implications, there were some concerns about "double punishment" of those alleged to be involved in HSB because they are subject to potential punitive action such as exclusion or other outcomes at school and to potential criminal justice sanctions.

There were also concerns about distinguishing young people into 'perpetrators' and 'victims' and the need to also identify and address any needs of those involved in HSB, including as pertain to safeguarding needs arising from allegations. For example, a practitioner working in Targeted Youth Support described it as:

> "…a challenge… it does seem that they [schools]… safeguard the alleged victim quite well… the perpetrator might be kept away from them in terms of contact, in terms of safety planning and things, but that's about it…"

They elaborated that:

> "… being accused of it [HSB] and going through a police investigation has had such a detrimental effect or might have a detrimental effect upon their [the alleged perpetrator's]

> *wellbeing… sometimes that had led, and there's at least two examples that I can think of for this, whereby being accused of something like that had led to… social isolation, they've lost friends, they've been accused of it, it's actually become a social issue for them, which then obviously impacts upon mental health and other aspects of their life."*

At the same time, a teacher was concerned that delays in the process reduce protection for those seeking support which then reduces capacity for changing the behaviour of those involved in HSB:

> *"I think police… need to be felt to be a protective factor for children who go and seek support… when some kind of criminal act does take place, their response has to be in an appropriate, timely manner… things just take too long and too much time passes… I just think that the timescales aren't really conducive to changing behaviour in those children."*

The girls below recounted their experiences of feeling 'let down' by the incongruence between what they had been told to do in response to HSB and their experience of the policing response. They had been told to report HSB and had been informed about legal categories of abuse. They were reluctant to do because of shame and self-blame and concerns about 'anti-snitch' peer cultures. They were encouraged to "be brave and come forward", yet then experienced substantial police delays, limited communication/updates and, ultimately, the outcome was NFA.

> *"…because I had been involved with stuff before, but they take a long time to respond with it. It was like three months… by that time, it's all blown over. So, then it's just over, then you should forget about it. And then they bring it all back up and it's like you're just sat there wondering what's going to happen, and then nothing happened…"*

> *"…if someone gets them involved with something, then I would want them to sort it out quickly… because police… sometimes they don't help… they would say stuff: oh, yeah, we'll be there to help you and stuff. And people think, oh, yeah, and then they've got the police involved. And then they're like, they won't really help me. They haven't really don't what they said they would do. They, sort of like, make it as if they've got to do something."*

> *"It's like false promises."*

> *"I was worried about what was going to happen. And then they just came back on nothing. Nothing else has been done… and like they didn't even speak to the person, or whatever."*

> *"… you feel really small and, like, unappreciated, because, yeah, you just don't feel like they have taken it seriously and you feel like, they need to take further action for you to feel confident, because you might still be scared or worried of going outside, in case it happens again."*

Showing some understanding of young people's perspectives regarding experiences such as those described the girls above, two female police officers described a personal reluctance to report a sexual offence were they to experience it. One remarked:

> *"I mean, as a police officer, I'd probably, unless it was something really serious, I probably wouldn't report it to the police, because there's no staff, it will just take an absolute age… it's all down to just no levels of staffing. And if it's not, in my mind, if it's not important, I'm not going to add to that person's list of what… that is the reality of it" (HHPU1)*

However, when delivering the CPD session to police, there was some pushback on the idea that police are being inactive in response to these allegations, including when the outcome is NFA. They countered that they are often doing a lot of work and that other interventions may be taking place. The issue seems to be around communication between all parties and managing expectations and safeguarding of young people during the period of investigation.

When asked to comment on the ramifications of lengthy investigations and the likelihood of 'no further action', a teacher felt that it is important to be honest and to explain the young people the support that will

be available to them were they to report, bearing in mind that it will be a challenging experience for them:

> *"…just reassuring them, because there's always this fear of, well, if I tell someone, it's gonna… get worse. But also, sometimes it does get worse, nine times out of 10. If you tell someone about it… it probably will get worse before it gets better. But sometimes we have to ride the storm before the fairer weather comes. Yeah, that's kind of tough to deal with, because… you've done the right thing. But I'm telling you now, that's probably before it gets better. In that period of that being worse, this is where your support is, and you must come and continue to tell me…"*

A police officer likewise felt that it is important to be transparent:

> *"There [are] just too many delays throughout the whole process. Because even if you've got enough, evidentially, to pursue the case… the officer [needs] to have enough time to build a… case… which takes a long time… then there's delays in the court process… it's just being realistic with young people… without being really negative." (HHPU4)*

There are, therefore, wider structural and systemic issues affecting the policing of sexual violence in general that are affecting the policing of HSB among young people and which police (and partners) are being called upon to address through relationship-based practice (i.e., through communication and transparency) with young people. It also relates to effective information sharing and multiagency working between partners.

## Information sharing and multiagency working

Delineation of roles, coupled with consistent information sharing and partnership working, was deemed vital by many of the police officers to respond effectively to HSB and adequately safeguard young people involved and affected by HSB.

> *"[police are not] … social workers, we're not counsellors, we're not psychiatrists, we're not trained to that level at all… we then do a referral to those people and pass the concerns on to them. And then they can do their own assessment if they see fit. We're not trained to actually deal with it as such, it's just if we pick up on it, we can talk to the offender about it and say we'll signpost you to whoever it is that they need to be going on to…" (HHPU1)*

> *"…you've got young people that are in sexual relationships, or their parents think that they might be, but they haven't got that relationship with a kid where they can talk to them openly. Sometimes the Targeted Youth Support will get involved, and then they will chat to them about healthy relationships. And then they will get a nurse in …to support once they've built a rapport. And then they will go in and talk to them about sexual stuff. And I think that works quite well." (YEO1)*

> *"…my job is to work in partnership with schools, partner agencies, anyone involving young people to try and deter them from criminality. So, that could be either supporting them or helping with the school and educating or signposting to other agencies that can help… They can be your bog-standard teenager with the issues that they face, they can have extra issues at home, there can be issues within the school, they can have additional needs that haven't been picked up. And then the relevant support is not in place for that young person. So, it's really varied. And normally when we go in, we go in with kind of a microscopic lens, if you like, and we actually uncover more things that we're not necessarily aware of" (YEO2)*

Several of the police officers were concerned about the nature of information sharing and communication between schools and police, with issues pertaining both to over- and under-sharing information. For example, an officer asked:

> "…what is it that you [schools] want from us as policing? And we can always go, actually, that's, that's not, that's not us, type of thing, or that is us. And then the other way around as well, policing, this is what we're expecting from you as schools if you're reporting to us." (YEO3)

Police said they have relationships with DSLs across schools of varying qualities, shaped mainly by the extent to which understandings and expectations are shared and managed effectively. For example:

> "We've got some good schools, some not so good… I would say we've got a good rapport with our schools. And if made aware of something, they tend to contact us first before they even record it. So, they'll find the job past us and say, look, we've been made aware of this, or we've got this information, what should we do with it? Because all of our DSLs in the schools, they've got… our phone numbers and our email addresses. So, they can contact us when they need to." (YEO1)

> "if you have a [close] professional [relationship with the school] because you're in there quite often speaking with the safeguarding leads and you have that understanding of always where the balance is, whereas if the schools are not having regular conversations with police, they make up their own minds and what they think should be a police matter and what it shouldn't be… Police are involved in safeguarding, as well as criminal activity, and sometimes they merge closely into each other, so it's about making sure we get the balance right… is it policing [young people of concern] should be coming to? Or is it your multiagency hub? …This comes down to communication. Schools should be quite clear when they're handing it over to the police… in different areas, multiagency hubs work brilliantly. And in some areas, they don't work very well. That's because you've got a number of agencies all in one place that got different priorities, different resourcing, etc." (YEO3)

Reflective of the emphasis on 'intel gathering' outlined above, there was a desire among police for DSLs to be forthcoming with reports of emerging issues and incidents, even when dealt with 'in-house.' They felt this helps enable police to keep abreast of what is happening among young people, which they deemed particularly important if they are called upon to deal with incidents.

> "I was in the schools weekly, to be honest, sometimes daily… mostly started off with sexual images that were being exchanged. And it grew from there, through exploitation, via sometimes blackmail. And that was a case of getting into the school to work out the extent of just how big it was. Sometimes the schools don't really know how to handle it to be honest. And they worry about sometimes making a mountain out of a molehill. They don't really understand the data they've got and just how valuable it is to police to offer that safeguarding… if you get the DSL or the safeguarding lead in a school who's really switched on, it can be absolutely priceless with the information they can give you." ( HHPU3)

For example, regarding image sharing among young people:

> "The DSLs are keeping it to themselves. We don't have a history of it. So, we will deal with it under the College of Policing guidance, like words of advice, don't do it again. But we may have someone who's done it five or six times before. We just don't know about it… It's really uncomfortable; it's caused a lot of disagreements within our DSLs and our YEOs about the correct response, which is that our DSL would tell us and then we'd record it, and then we'd be like, we need to see the phone etc. and the DSLs are like, but no, our guidance says that we can delete the images and then give the phones back." (YEO2)

Even when not deemed in the public interest to proceed, police want to have the record for future safeguarding:

> "DSL was made aware of an incident involving two females that were experimenting and had gone too far. And she didn't know what to do about it, because she was very, the DSL was very much like, you know the children don't want to do anything, they've learned about that,

*but from our side, it is a crime technically speaking. So, then we have to make sure that it was primed, and then made sure that were relevant support was in place and moving forward. And obviously, it's on our system now. And there's a record of it. If this was to happen again, I mean, we haven't gone there taking any further action investigative wise. However, if there is further issues or further reports involving any of these people, then we've kind of got a bit of a background, that we know that, you know, they've had the talk already, or they've already been given the safeguarding and the signposting before and that hasn't helped." (YEO2)*

There was also the opposite concern that schools may always report image sharing but the police may be reluctant to take action:

*"…[reports] might come through from a teacher or something with a duty of care to obviously report it, because it is, it's a criminal offence. But I think, from my perspective, and how I did deal with them, and how, you know, I was my sergeants would choose to deal with the misfit, a big dose of, you know, common sense, because whilst, you know, they're under 18, and therefore, it is a criminal offence if two, you know, 16 17 year olds decide to take those photos of themselves and consensually, like, share them with a partner at the time, then, obviously, that's, it's not ideal, but it's, you know, it is what it is, and it does happen. And if it's done with concern, and, and that at the time, the person is quite happy to do that, then there's not a huge amount really, from a criminal perspective that that we would do." (HHPU2)*

This officer's perspective is significant because it distinguishes consensual image sharing from a blanket approach that all 'experimentation' is technically illegal and should be logged.  These distinctions are what are crucial in training of the police and school staff.

The online safety expert was of the view that discretion by school staff is not a problem so long as the school has *"a good handle on how to deal with things like nude and semi-nude images and videos… [if they] are really good at referring out when they need to refer out… we don't want to criminalise young people unnecessarily."* The issue of consent and harm is of uppermost concern in identifying when any of these incidents may cross over into HSB.

The Children's Services Manager highlighted that school staff should be trained on when HSB incidents need to be reported:

*"…it's about school staff being really aware that if this is a criminal matter – so, if the child is disclosing rape to them, or a serious sexual assault – the staff should treat it like any other safeguarding, in that they listen, they reassure, but then it's reported in the right way."*

While police generally wanted schools to share information with them, they were mindful of 'mission creep' whereby police become involved in matters when it is not necessary and may be counterproductive:

*"Maybe sometimes mission creep… into stuff that we probably don't need to be in and vice versa… it's about all of us trying to work to make sure in my mind, that we keep young people safe, and they can have the best opportunities to grow up. And then hopefully, if they're having those best opportunities to grow up, they turn into responsible community minded adults. You know, hopefully, that circle grows and grows on there, and then there's less crime, there's less victims as less offenders." (YEO3)*

The desire among police to be told about emerging issues by DSLs may causes problems for police regarding workload if they deem DSLs to be over-using them:

*"Sometimes the fact that the schools have got our direct number, they do tend to phone us more than what they should do. They phone us first for us to triage stuff, without actually then reporting something as a crime because they think that the fact that they've spoken to us, they've done their job, they've reported it, when in fact, they haven't. And also, sometimes it can be a bit of a hindrance, because we then end up the schools then think that we're*

> *like their personal police officer, and then we end up getting involved in everything that we shouldn't really being a part of." (YEO1)*

There was recognition among police that the lines between what should and should not be shared can be 'difficult' to identify:

> *"… it's a difficult one because obviously, the schools like to deal with a lot of things in house and they will deal with that correctly. But some things will need to be made aware of, because there could be things that we've heard speaking to other children that we believe we need to know. But again, that's resolved through communication." (HHPU3)*

Police felt that funding and resource constraints can lead the DSL to report to the police if they identify the police as the only partner likely to take action. This problem of under-resourcing of other services is returned to below.

> *"[Reduced funding] over the years… limits what [schools] can do and if something happens… [they] don't quite know where to send it. Unfortunately, that's why it gets pushed to the police, because they don't know quite else [to do with it]. They've even asked potentially other places but haven't got anything back." (YEO3)*

Some of the teachers felt that certain incidents require reporting when the school is otherwise struggling to safeguard by themselves. For example, a DSL said:

> *"[some HSB has] to be addressed by trained specialists, and therapeutic intervention, whatever that might be. And that's what the police should be doing. So, when they're getting information about young people, and their behaviours, indicating things which would raise alarms, then there should be a response that is timely, because I'm not having that conversation with that individual. It's not my job. But who is having that conversation with that individual? Has anyone had that conversation with that Individual? Because I don't know."*

An officer likewise felt that schools may not always be adequately resourced or otherwise well placed to deal with serious incidents related to sexual violence particularly: *"I don't know they have emotional learning support… I don't know to what level they are trained… if they have the capability to do anything further"* (HHPU1).

Schools may be in a difficult position making decisions about how to safeguard depending on whether a crime is deemed to have taken place with more safeguarding action if an allegation is 'proven'. Referring to an allegation of rape, a DSL recounted how:

> *"…we hadn't had any information from the police about it… our understanding was that there'd been a sexual interaction. And that was an accusation of rape. It was identified [by police] to be consensual… not an official offence. And so therefore, the way that we respond to that was quite difficult because… we need to make sure both children are okay and feeling safe and not feeling vulnerable in our school. But if there had been a proven rape, our response to that obviously be quite different… we would have to consider very carefully where those two children were… we were in quite a difficult situation, because we weren't really given clarity of information by the police… we have quite conflicting information from the two parents about what they wanted. And the boy's parents, in particular, were very concerned about him feeling safe…."*

DSLs and teachers raised concerns about the quality of communication from police to schools and the lack of agreed-upon expectations, whereby police may not always provide updates or outcomes to schools regarding incidents, including those reported directly to police or young people not via the school. Regarding the rape allegation above, the DSL elaborated that the matter was not helped by issues pertaining to police-parent-school communication:

*"I think the police in that situation complicated matters, because there was a lack of clarity about what they share with the family. So, we're getting information from the boy's mother saying, the police have said you've got to do this, this, this, and this. And at that point, we're like, well, we haven't even heard from the police… So, we then contact the police. And the police basically don't say that at all. They say the polar opposite… then that was unhelpful because the police, we were on the backfoot because we were having these conversations with the families and we did what we would normally do… but the boy's [mother] might have felt that we should possibly have done more because she had had this impression from the police but when we spoke to the police, it was completely the opposite because they can't require us to put anything in place when there's no crime has been committed."*

This DSL said that it would be helpful to have more specific guidance from police about appropriate safeguarding during investigations. Referring to an incident involving an investigation of a child suspected to have been "*accessing quite extreme, viewing quite extreme child pornography of over, you know, of a very sexualised nature around children,*" the DSL was concerned:

*"…is this person at risk in school? No, we don't didn't think so. Because there've never been any concern about him. But then it was like, well… we can't not respond to this… we were watching him all the time for any kinds of concerns… we were given no advice and guidance from the police about how we should respond to managing him or from social services… He was being very closely monitored by the senior team to make sure there was nothing to worry about."*

The participant from Surrey LEA felt that poor "understanding around schools' roles and statutory guidance" within multiagency arrangements are unhelpful:

*"… [multiagency arrangements are] all there to help schools access social care, or police or health or whoever, rather than help them assess what that means for the school alongside their statutory guidance… sometimes [schools] call the police for something that isn't a police matter."*

A police officer felt that an agreed "protocol… co-written between education and policing" (YEO3) may help in establishing ownership and decision-making processes on what to do with different levels and types of HSB in terms of recognition, recording, outcome and follow-up. A small-scale study conducted in Canada identified that relationship-based practice applied to the relationship between police and schools may help in enabling police to act as advisors to schools and may improve school confidence regarding responding to young people's behaviours in school, but requires consistent staffing in order for relationships to be built and maintained and avoidance of any drift to an excessively legal or criminal justice-oriented approach to students by schools as a result of police input (Broll and Howells, 2021).

## Early intervention and response from non-police and non-school services

There was a related problem regarding service level thresholds for referrals and safeguarding beyond schools and police. Regardless of whether and to whom incidents are reported – formally or informally – scope for early intervention may be limited because resourcing constraints mean that services are only working with young people once they pass a high threshold of need and severity, with a DSL stating that:

*"…we've got quite a few people that you can refer to get that early help, early intervention, but many schools don't have that… there's actually no one that you can then refer to before you then have to go into the… Child Protection Plan. By that point, though we're already too far, they're already too far into harmful sexual behaviour… drugs, alcohol, substance abuse, peer-on-peer abuse, whatever it might be whichever borough they are under, if you don't have the early intervention, who are you asking for, for help?"*

A police officer described the lack of scope to intervene early via non-criminal justice routes as being:

> *"…a bit crazy, because I'm like, you'd think it would be the police doing it after [after services have provided support] …because you've hit that point where you need a [criminal justice] intervention… but it's not, it's the other way around." (YEO1)*

As discussed below, this officer also argued that failing to intervene early condones criminal sexual behaviour into adulthood. Part of the response to this was argued to be clear educational routes to understanding what constituted sexual violence crimes and protective strategies.

Likewise, the senior therapeutic practitioner at the residential service for boys involved in HSB felt that early intervention is impossible in the current funding climate, which is ultimately economically and socially costly:

> *"I think it really does start with investing properly in social care at prevention work… [the residential service is] an expensive service, it costs taxpayers millions, it's like it's ridiculous. It would be much, much more effective and much more, much nicer if, you know, that investment can be put into the local authority… I don't think they're given the tools to do the job properly."*

Similarly, the online safety expert felt that any broader intervention work with those involved in HSB is often hampered by a lack of resources:

> *"… one of the most frustrating things is where we'd have a young person come forward. We've got a lot of work… resources where we could support the victim, but hardly, virtually nothing to support the perpetrator… we'd signpost them on… and you're looking at significant amounts of money [for these services] and the involvement of a social worker… but year, resources for perpetrators are just non-existence. We need to do better… we need more funding."*

Participants were, mostly, sympathetic to the challenges faced by partners regarding service thresholds and the challenges of intervening early or having the resource only to intervene once a young person has passed a high threshold:

> *"Social Services, they're so stretched as well. So, you have to kind of take into account that if you're asking for some information with regards to safeguarding, it may not necessarily come back straight away, because social services and different agencies like probation is so high. And the same was with the police as well. It's never perfect, but from speaking to the people I speak to from Child and Adult Social Services there, they are all going to pull in in the same direction. It's just you can see working so closely that they are under extreme pressure." (HHPU3)*

> *"Children's Services, from my experiences. They're very underfunded… there's a lot of movement, and you would not be working with the same social worker on a regular basis, because they'd move on so much… it would be difficult partnership working, because you might go out as a DC [detective constable], potentially, and do a joint visit with a social worker. And then you might not be able to contact them after that visit, for months, to even share information, and it's so frustrating, isn't it, because when we do have these times, and we really fail children, or vulnerable persons, it's always the same things, like not sharing information. With which is just so frustrating. But the social workers generally always want to do a good job. They've just got so many children they're trying to look after." (HHPU4)*

Police described it as challenging to intervene themselves without the mandate of a formal criminal justice response. In the context of the commitment to divert young people away from the criminal justice system where possible, there was some concern among a police officer that there may be missed opportunities to intervene and prevent escalation of behaviour:

> *"…the powers that be above us do not want to prosecute children. Even if they are somebody, in my opinion, that comes to our notice quite regularly… we as the police get very frustrated*

> *with it. Because we submit all the information, we push it and push it… and we get told but they're children, we don't want to criminalise children, but then if we don't criminalise children, and we don't deal with them, you're then ending up with an adult who is then having these tendencies that we could have prevented from happening when they were a child." (YEO1)*

This officer was concerned that *"kids aren't stupid… They know that they don't get prosecuted… police aren't going to do anything, and they continue with their behaviour… [adult offenders] if you looked at their history as a child, they should have been dealt with a long time ago."*

They elaborated that the police are failing both 'victims' and 'perpetrators' by taking this approach and instead advocated:

> *"…a more robust approach on things were too softy, softy… we should then be meeting the expectations of our victims, because we're failing victims, and, and then you have the knock-on effect of… Why should we bother reporting it? …the common phrase, nothing gets done anyway… we're setting the kids up to fail on the offset, you go in there, giving them all these expectations, asking them to open up to you, asking them to trust you, asking them to put pen to paper, they do it, you failed them, because they've actually done what you've asked them to do. And that was probably a massive thing for that person …But you know what? They're 14, we're just gonna give them words of advice… you're also not only letting the victims down, you're also letting the perpetrators down… that young person… could have had early intervention and early support and help… whereas if we just go in, no further action… we're then letting them continue with their behaviour. And sometimes, the reason they're doing these things, and the reason they're behaving the way they are, is because they're crying out for help. You've got it on both sides. If you do nothing, then you're enabling and you're then letting the victims down as well. So, what do you do?"*

The senior practitioner at the child protection charity suggested that when interventions are not possible from agencies or services outside of school (be that police or others), an educational approach can be taken which, from their perspective, would be better than just a reactive disciplinary approach anyway:

> *"So, there are things that you can do there… do you need to get a double down on some of those [educational interventions]? …how is your staff team sitting with all of this, because it's just an opportunity maybe to do a little bit more training about harmful sexual behaviour… there are lots of actions we can do on the back of that… It's not just thinking about the perpetrator and all of this but thinking about the enabling context in some way."*

Yet, a police officer sympathised with the idea that some schools may struggle to find the resource for either internal practice or to buy-in any required external input:

> *"It's ridiculous how much they [schools] have to fit into their curriculum, the PSHE as well as dealing with all the stuff that's happened outside of school… It's a nonstop thing, schools, and I really sympathise with them because an incident can happen. And then you know, 10 other incidents happen and that one incident isn't dealt with, because they're dealing with all the other bits and pieces going on. So, education wise, I feel that it could be better. But I feel it needs to be more of a kind of a national approach, rather than an individual approach. On the basis that some of my schools have funding, and they have external agencies come in and they get that input, other schools don't get that funding, they don't have that, really, they don't have the financial resources to get another agency to deliver that input" (YEO2)*

It was clear that lack of resources and funding around HSB went across the educational sector, children's services, social services, and policing. The need for a well-resourced, joined-up multiagency approach and for the educational aspect of the policing of HSB to go beyond school environments also related to the need to capture young people not attending school, including those who have been excluded as part of the response to criminal justice processes:

> *"…Yes, lots of kids go to school, but there are an awful lot of kids that don't go to school as well. And it's reaching everybody with the important messages. It's reaching people that that have learning differences …there's a whole area of other young people that really potentially need to be more supported as well. And that that's an area that obviously we need to be looking at…"* (POLIT)

> *"We've got multiple children that are [not in education], who want to be in education, but their needs aren't being met in mainstream, who have then gone to PRUs [Pupil Referral Unit] and that's not worked out… and they don't have any education… a lot of them don't even get online learning now. I literally visited one yesterday, who's been out of school for a year and three months… it's particularly young males that are in this situation where they cannot do online learning… They need that human interaction, because actually when they're one-on-one, because we engage with them, they will, but they cannot do it over a computer. And also, because they're not meeting anyone or getting out, it's not healthy for them either. So, we're in a bit of a catch-22."* (YEO4)

There are, therefore, interlocking funding and resource constraints that impact early intervention, non-criminal justice intervention and intervention within and beyond schools, including to address the needs of those not attending school.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Preventing and responding to HSB among young people is a multifaceted endeavour. There were varying perspectives on whether and how police should be involved with preventative education in schools. Likewise, there was awareness about the challenges entailed in responding effectively to incidents. Overall, it seems that there is a role for police in both prevention and response, but it needs to be part of a holistic, multiagency approach that avoids assuming that the law and criminal justice processes can alone capture and resolve the issues identified within young people's HSB cultures.

Relationship-based practice may help in establishing a longer-term approach to addressing HSB whereby police seek to build and establish trust with young people and, in turn, improve reporting and engagement rates. Importantly, it seems that there must be transparency about the reality of criminal justice processes and the complexities of the law regarding evidentiary and public interest requirements. There must also be clear and consistent understanding between and among professionals about when and how to share information and shared expectations regarding responses to incidents.

At the same time, participants were clearly concerned about funding and resourcing, whereby constraints in these regards hindered early intervention and comprehensive responses to incidents from a multiagency perspective.

The following section offers specific recommendations for policy and practice, with section 6 setting out a training and professional development exercise based on realistic, evidence based scenarios of HSB among young people.

# 5. Recommendations for policy and practice pertaining to preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour through police-school partnerships

The following framework is built on the assumption schools are places of education, where young people are prepared with the information and skills that they need to navigate the world around them. Schools are microcosms of society and, as places of learning, there opportunities for schools to be places where negative behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that exist in society can be challenged. Young people will inevitably make mistakes and get things wrong and will need safe adults to help guide and correct their mistakes. This does not mean that young people should not be held responsible for their actions but should have space to correct their actions and make amends, rather than being drawn into overly punitive or undue criminalisation, which may be counterproductive and do more harm than good.

These recommendations take a relationship-based approach, designed to promote ethical behaviours and to help young people attain sexual citizenship. The approach involves acknowledging that young people have the right to honest information and the space to help them manage their relationships both online and offline. Equally, it acknowledges that young people will engage in behaviours which, while part of typical development, might make adults uncomfortable and may, sometimes, require a safeguarding response, such as the sharing of intimate images or viewing of pornography. Yet in order for safe adults to help young people navigate new and evolving contexts of sexual development and life, taking a negative, shame or abstinence approach is counterproductive; instead, it is our role to acknowledge both the opportunities and challenges of being online for young people and the diversity of their experiences of and perspectives on the contemporary nature of HSB. This is a harm-reduction approach based around empowering young people to foster critical thinking and have ethical relationships based on kindness and mutual respect.
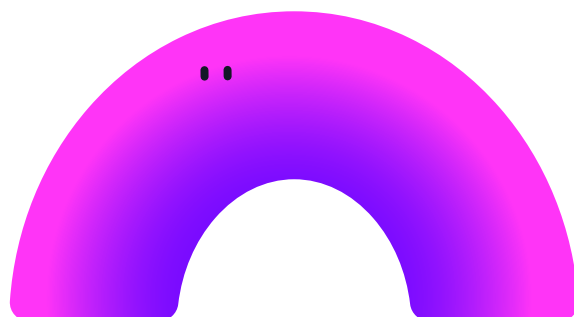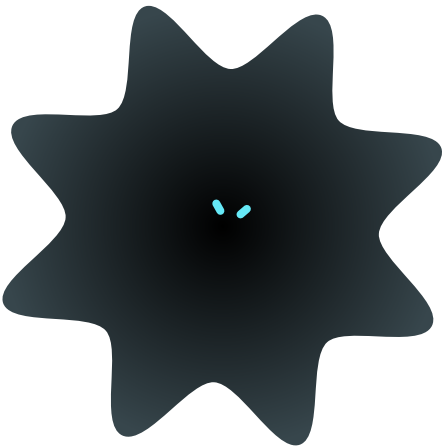
## 1. Assess

**Read through the recommendations and consider how these fit with your existing policies and practice**

We recognise that change takes time and often comes from making small incremental changes.

**Identify and understand pupils' needs**

Efforts to prevent and respond to HSB among young people unfolds within their wider peer and social contexts. Both those who report and those who have instigated the behaviours may be ostracised by peers or accused of overreacting or lying. When young people make a complaint, their main concern is that the unwanted behaviour stops.

**Embed HSB into existing policies**

Rather than treating HSB as a separate phenomenon instead, recognise how it is part of wider school culture and should be addressed as integral to how we treat each other in an ethical manner.

Relevant policies include Behaviour, e-safety and bullying.

Consider a move towards a Relationship policy in replacement of a Behaviour policy to emphasise a focus from a punitive, deficit model, to a rights-based approach based on ethical relationships.

## 2. Communicate

**Relationship-based practice**

Police should operate informally within the areas young people inhabit – including in school – with the aim of building relationships between police and young people.

Identify and tackle any mis/distrust between police and cohorts of young people (e.g., among those who have had negative experience with the police and/or received negative messaging from others).

Establish and clarify the roles of the police at different times. Uniformed police presence in schools may hinder relationship-based practice if it is experienced as intimidating among young people but may impart a message of credibility. When engaging in relationship-building, it is better to avoid a 'suited and booted' attire and instead dress casually to reduce the emphasis on risk, harm and punishment.

**Clear structures and systems in place for ongoing dialogue between schools, police and other services to share details of incidents and emerging issues**

Given that schools, parents, police and other partners may sometimes identify issues, report HSB or otherwise share information bilaterally, there should be a system of safeguarding alerts between schools, police and other partners whereby bilateral communication can be acted upon.

Schools and police should develop ways of sharing details of emerging concerns and 'lower-level' incidents in ways that enable safeguarding and joint understandings of the issues (and, in turn, effective practice over the long-term) without undue burden or, importantly, criminalisation of young people or other punitive action.

## 3. Respond

**Transparent and accessible reporting mechanisms**

Ensure transparency about the realities of the justice process when engaging with those reporting HSB, those alleged to be involved in HSB and, as applicable, the wider peer collective whereby any fall-out from an allegation may unfold to deleterious effect.

Young people should be told about the support that will be in place as they undergo a potentially challenging and uncertain legal process, including when incidents are reported and proactively via preventative education.

**Acknowledgment and amelioration of the risks of 'double punishment'**

These risks arise from long delays in investigations and outcomes and the informal and non-CJS related punishments and consequences that can affect those alleged to be involved in HSB (e.g., exclusion from school).

## 4. Prevent

**Police involvement in education as partners with schools and other professionals**

Police have a role to play in delivering holistic education to young people, including about the law and legal process, but education on topics (like nude image sharing, consent) should not be entirely outsourced to police.

Where education on the law is provided, link legal definitions to applied situations to explore the extent to which and how the law may guide behaviour and what is left unanswered or ambiguous.

In turn, address how motivations for conduct in relationships transcend the law and the role of values, beliefs and attitudes in shaping individual, interpersonal and social conduct.

Focus as much on creating dialogue and fostering critical thinking through educational interventions as well as knowledge transfer.

Avoid the use of isolated assemblies for addressing emerging issues or specific incidents. They may be alienating and, at best, not impactful or, at worst, may exacerbate tensions among pupils.

**Harm reduction**

Promote ethical behaviours and communications based on kindness and mutual respect rather than fear of legal consequences or other punishment.

Address the nuances of consent and privacy, including in online domains.

Inform young people about the disclination toward criminalising their sexual behaviours (including online) with the aim of raising awareness about abuse and encouraging those experiencing or witnessing abuse to report it.

Challenge victim blaming, stigma and bullying among young people, including as connect to online sexual behaviours whereby these consequences can be used pedagogically to deter the behaviours entirely rather than to address abuse specifically with counterproductive effects in terms of normalising these consequences.

Go beyond individualistic approaches to risks and needs and address the role of peer culture in shaping young people's sexual conduct and the recognition of and response to abuse.

Resist reifying binary gender norms and masculinity/power and femininity/victimisation and instead identify how gender norms and other factors shape expectations and conduct for sex and relationships in diverse and fluid ways.

## 5. Training and CPD

Practitioners and professionals should develop and implement gender- and sexuality-sensitive relationship-based practice based on a clear understanding of the causes and contexts of HSB.

Practitioners and professionals should be well-versed in the realities of the law and legal process and the scope for (and limitations of) the law in being able to fully address the issues at play.

The contents of this report and the training/CPD exercise in section 5 will help develop knowledge and skills in the above regard.
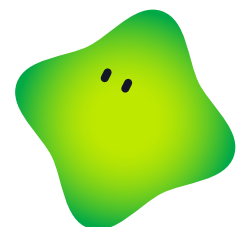
# 6. Case studies for training and professional development

This section presents case studies of a range of HSB incidents that may take place between young people and that may come to the attention of schools and police. The case studies have been developed based on research evidence regarding the nature of HSB among young people with some adaptation of the incidents dealt with by Surrey Police that were reviewed for this project. They are intended to stimulate reflection on the scope and limitations of the law in understanding and responding to different types of HSB among young people and the need to clearly disentangle harmful and abusive elements of young people's sexual behaviour, in light of the contexts in which HSB takes place, distinct from binary framings of young people's sexual behaviour as either legal or illegal or as inherently risky and inappropriate. The case studies also address situations in which an 'all-or-nothing' approach precludes a more nuanced response; for example, if all young people involved in an incident of nude image sharing are considered to be breaking the law, there arise implications for specifically addressing non-consensual or otherwise abusive elements.

We hope that the case studies are helpful in stimulating reflection and discussion about effective prevention and response to HSB among young people, across the range of incidents. The case studies can be presented to professionals and practitioners attending training and professional development sessions on HSB among young people, including police officers and school staff, as well as other members of the statutory and non-statutory children's workforce.

When considering each case study, professionals and practitioners should focus on:

## 1. What is the harm?

- Would this incident constitute HSB? If so, what type of HSB, where along the continuum [see Hackett's (2010) continuum in appendix I] may it sit and why? If not or if it is ambiguous, outline why.

- Would this incident potentially be illegal? What may be the challenges in determining the legal status, including regarding whether the law is 'fit for purpose' (e.g., regarding image-based sexual abuse and harassment).

- How risky or harmful is this incident? What factors are significant in deciding the level of risk and harm?

- What are the potential causal factors? For the individuals, wider peer group, social and cultural norms, etc.

## 2. What should the response be?

- Map out the possible responses to the incidents and identify the most appropriate response to this kind of incident. Please consider:

  o Reporting of the incident, support for all the young people involved, potential involvement of parents/carers, recording and remedial action.

  o The reasons why the response is deemed most appropriate.

  o Who has responsibility for the response and the partnership/multiagency working that is required.

  o Any potential counter-productive consequences of responding in this way and where identified, ways of addressing these consequences.

  o Potential alternative or additional responses.

  o Is the most appropriate response likely or feasible within current working conditions (e.g., as pertain to resources, working cultures, professional roles, etc.)?

## 3. Reflect: current practice and prevention:

· Reflect on current practice – is the most appropriate response reflected in what actually happens in most cases? If not, why not? What needs to be in place to respond effectively?

· Have you reduced the risk factors AND boosted any potential protective factors for the young people involved?

· What action could have been taken proactively to prevent this kind of incident occurring? Who needs to be involved in taking the action? What partnership/multiagency working would have supported this action?

### Case study 1

A year 10 girl has told a friend that she felt pressured to engage in unwanted sex with her boyfriend (also a year 10 pupil at the school) at a party over the weekend. Both the girl and boy had been drinking alcohol at the party and the girl told her friend that while she fancied him, she wasn't ready to have sex, but after agreeing to go to the room with him, she felt he expected her to do so. When he started kissing and touching her on the bed, she initially liked it, but when he pushed things further, she said, 'not here' and tried to push him away, but after he said that he really liked her and was turned on, she felt she had to 'go along with it'. The boy has since told friends about them having sex.

### Case study 2

A group of 15-year-old girls at a sleepover decide it would be 'funny' to 'catfish' a girl they go to school with, who they deem to be 'unpopular' and 'weird'. They pretend to be a boy from school and message the girl saying that 'he' fancies her and would they like to exchange nudes. After several increasingly sexualised exchanges, the girl sends a nude image. The group then reveal their identity to the girl and post her image and the messages on social media. The girl feels suicidal and refuses to leave her bedroom following the incident.

### Case study 3

Two 13-year-old girls are spending time together in one of their bedrooms, chatting and listening to music. They start talking about boys they fancy and one of the girls says that she is worried about having her first kiss. She says to the other girl that they should 'practice' on each other first, but the other girl says she doesn't want to. The girl then tells her to lighten up and proceeds to try to kiss her. The girl's mother walks into the room and is confused about what is happening.

### Case study 4

A 16-year-old girl discloses to a friend that she was physically forced into performing oral sex on her boyfriend after he had been drinking. The girl's friend reacted angrily and said that the boy is 'out of order' and 'can't get away with it'. The friend then shared a post on social media stating that the boy is a 'rapist' and 'makes her sick'. Other young people online are commenting on the post and spreading rumours about what may have happened. The boy is now being threatened by some young people at the school and is worried that he may be attacked, so isn't leaving his house.

## Case study 5

Two 16-year-old boys were having sex at a party. They were in a relationship but had only told a few close friends that they were gay. The sexual activity at the party was consensual and took place in a private room. However, some other young people at the party saw them and filmed them without their knowledge. The video has since been posted on social media, with other young people from the school and some anonymous internet users posting homophobic comments under the video. The boys are now both scared to come into school.

## Case study 6

A 15-year-old boy is hanging out with some friends at a party and his friends start talking about the girls they have had sex with. They ask the boy for his 'stories' and the boy looks embarrassed and doesn't say anything. They start teasing him for being a 'virgin' and point out girls at the party who may have sex with him. They call over to one of the girls and there is some sexualised 'banter' between them all. Later, after consuming a lot of alcohol, the girl says to the boy that she's 'up for it if he is' and that it'd be a good idea for him to just get 'losing his virginity' out of the way. They go upstairs to a bedroom and the boy feels increasingly anxious. He proceeds to engage in kissing and sexual touching upon initiation by the girl, but then struggles to maintain an erection. The girl laughs at him and goes back to the party telling everyone that he has a 'micro dick' and 'can't get it up'.

## Case study 7

A group of 15-year-old girls at a sleepover decide it would be 'funny' to trick a boy in their class for nudes. One of the girls pretends to be on her own and starts to flirt with him saying that she fancies him and after several increasingly sexualised exchanges, they ask him to send a picture of his penis. He obliges, the group laugh and share the picture amongst themselves and laugh about the size of his penis and call him a perv who sends unsolicited dick-pics to girls.

## Case study 8

A group of boys are coming out of the changing rooms on to the field ready to do PE. They see one of their classmates in front of them and run up behind him and debag him (pull his jogging bottoms down). As a result, his genitals and bottom are exposed to not only his 'friends' but also the girls in his year who are coming out of their changing rooms at the same time. Everyone laughs at him and he is is mortified that everyone has seen him, but feels he has to laugh along and shrug it off otherwise he will be ridiculed even further for not being able to take a joke.

## Case study 9

There are a group of eight year 10 boys, who individually are mostly polite and respectful; however, when together, unaware of their new-found size they take up a lot of space and are intimidating to other pupils and some staff. They are loud and seem to wind each other up, becoming more boisterous and showing off in front of each other to be the alpha male. This includes trying to flirt/harass girls in the corridors, using inappropriate sexualised language and generally being a nuisance. As a result, staff are always watching them and quick to shut down their behaviours and giving out detentions. The boys feel like they are treated unfairly and are becoming more combatant as a result. One of the boys has started answering back and being highly misogynist to female members of staff who try to reprimand them. Their behaviour is escalating.

## Case study 10

A group of year 9 pupils have been sharing clips of pornography on their phones. This started in a group at lunch, where they all laughed and tried to find the most disgusting clip they could to 'freak each other out'. It is now largely taking place outside of school in the evenings. The clips are escalating and getting more and more extreme. A boy who has ASD is included in the group. A complaint has been made to the school by a parent after their child showed them the images the boy had sent which included indecent images of young children. They want something done as they think he is clearly a 'paedo'.

## Case study 11

A year 9 girl is sent a close-up dick pick and torso (faceless) from a boy she fancies and asked to send one back. She does so with an image including her face. The boy shares the image with his class explaining he sent a fake image he googled. The girl is 'slut shamed' by her classmates and told she 'has no respect.'

## Case study 12

A year 8 boy sends a dick pic to another boy he thinks might be gay in his year group, saying he's 'curious.' The boy responds with a dick pic saying he's 'interested.' The first boy sends the image to his friend group with homophobic slurs and comments about penis size.

## Case study 13

A year 11 boy sends a dick pic to a girl he's met online asking 'wanna trade?'. The girl says she's not interested. The boy feels rejected and retaliates by posting details about the girl on an Instagram page exposing 'sluts and slags.'

# APPENDIX I – CONTINUUM OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

## Sexual behaviour's continuum model

| Normal | Inappropriate | Problematic | Abusive | Violent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| • Developmentally expected<br><br>• Socially acceptable<br><br>• Consensual, mutual, reciprocal<br><br>• Shared decision making | • Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour<br><br>• Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group<br><br>• Context for behaviour may be inappropriate<br><br>• Generally consensual and reciprocal | • Problematic and concerning behaviour<br><br>• Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected<br><br>• No overt elements of victimisation<br><br>• Consent issues may be unclear<br><br>• May lack reciprocity or equal power<br><br>• May include levels of compulsivity | • Victimising intent or outcome<br><br>• Includes misuse of power<br><br>• Coercion and force to ensure compliance<br><br>• Intrusive<br><br>• Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given<br><br>• May include elements of expressive violence | • Physically violent sexual abuse<br><br>• Highly intrusive<br><br>• Instrumental violence which is psychologically and/or sexually arousing to the child responsible for the behaviour<br><br>• Sadism |

Source: Smellie, Eastman and Firmin, 2019, adapted from Hackett (2010)
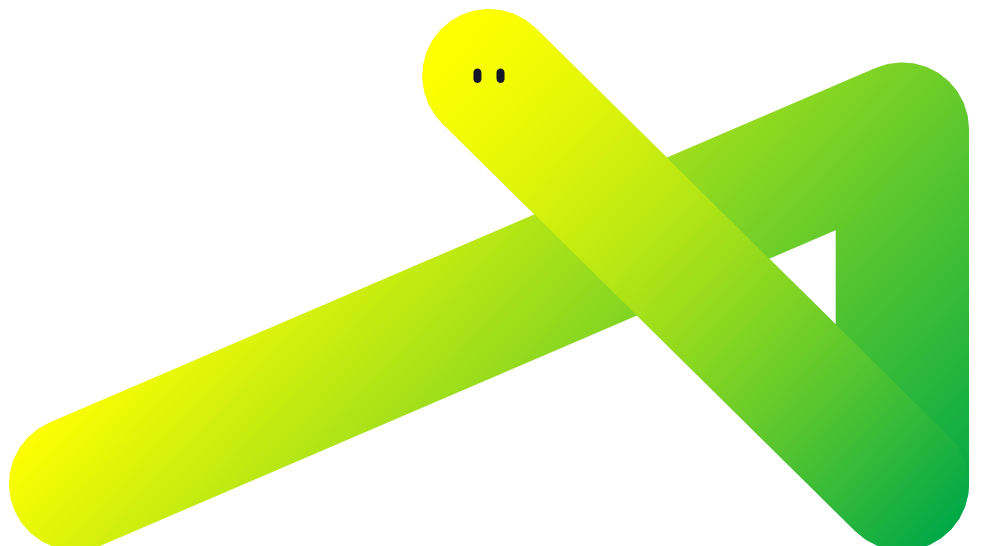
# APPENDIX II – QUANTITATIVE INCIDENT DATA

| Borough code | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| eL | 237 | 10.5 |
| SH | 157 | 6.9 |
| RM | 162 | 7.2 |
| WK | 192 | 8.5 |
| WV | 282 | 12.5 |
| SL | 180 | 8.0 |
| EP | 140 | 6.2 |
| RB | 326 | 14.4 |
| GD | 304 | 13.4 |
| MV | 152 | 6.7 |
| TD | 132 | 5.8 |
| | 2264 | 100.0 |

| Timeliness to outcome | mean (days) |
|---|---|
| | 155 |

| Dd entered commit | Mean (days) |
|---|---|
| | 996 |

| PMA group | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Other sexual offences | 391 | 17.3 |
| Serious sexual | 1487 | 65.7 |
| Other criminal offences | 374 | 16.5 |
| Violence without injury | 12 | 0.5 |
| | 2264 | 100.0 |

| PMA type | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Other sexual offences | 391 | 17.3 |
| Rape | 636 | 28.1 |
| Other criminal offences | 374 | 16.5 |
| Other serious sexual | 137 | 6.1 |
| Sexual assault | 714 | 31.5 |
| Malicious communications | 12 | 0.5 |
| | 2264 | **100.0** |

| Offence type | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Sexual activity involving child under 16 | 361 | 15.9 |
| Rape | 636 | 28.1 |
| Obscene publications etc | 374 | 16.5 |
| Sexual activity involving a child under 13 | 117 | 5.2 |
| Sexual assault on a female aged 13 and over | 472 | 20.8 |
| Sexual assault on a female child under 13 | 125 | 5.5 |
| Sexual assault on a male child under 13 | 62 | 2.7 |
| Abuse of children through sexual exploitation | 10 | 0.4 |
| Exposure and voyeurism | 24 | 1.1 |
| Sexual assault on a male aged 13 and over | 55 | 2.4 |
| Causing sexual activity without consent | 10 | 0.4 |
| Malicious communications | 12 | 0.5 |
| Sexual grooming | 6 | 0.3 |
| | 2264 | 100.0 |

| Cyber crime | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Y | 267 | 11.8 |

| Intimate partner | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| n | 1806 | 79.8 |
| Y | 458 | 20.2 |
| | 2264 | 100.0 |

| Victim age range | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Age 15 to 17 | 841 | 37.1 |
| Age 10 to 14 | 1246 | 55.0 |
| Age 05 to 09 | 126 | 5.6 |
| Age 01 to 04 | 43 | 1.9 |
| Age 00 | 2 | 0.1 |
| | 0 | 0.0 |
| | 6 | 0.3 |
| | 2264 | 100.0 |

| Outcome renamed | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| 03 / 03a: Adult caution | 4 | 0.2 |
| 15: CPS - Named suspect, victim supports but evidential difficulties | 76 | 3.4 |
| 16: Victim declines/withdraws support - named suspect identified | 706 | 31.2 |
| 01 / 01a: charged | 31 | 1.4 |
| 09: CPS - Prosecution not in public interest | 2 | 0.1 |
| 01 / 01a: summonsed/postal | 43 | 1.9 |
| 08: Community resolution / youth restorative | 40 | 1.8 |
| 15: Police - named suspect, victim supports but evidential difficulties | 561 | 24.8 |
| 02: Youth conditional caution | 11 | 0.5 |
| 13: Named suspect but victim/key witness deceased or too ill | 5 | 0.2 |
| Uiv: under investigation | 128 | 5.7 |
| 02a: alternate offence youth caution | 2 | 0.1 |
| 11: Named suspect below age of criminal responsibility | 60 | 2.7 |
| 20: Other body/agency has investigation primacy | 137 | 6.1 |
| 18: Investigation complete no suspect identified | 14 | 0.6 |
| 21: Police - named suspect, investigation not in the public interest | 384 | 17.0 |
| 10: Police - formal action not in public interest | 20 | 0.9 |
| 14: Victim declines/unable to support action to identify offender | 14 | 0.6 |
| 22: Outcome 22 validated (checkpoint) | 4 | 0.2 |
| 22: Outcome 22 unvalidated (not checkpoint) | 21 | 0.9 |
| 12: Named suspect too ill to prosecute | 1 | 0.0 |
| | 2264 | 100.0% |

| Offender gender | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Male | 2015 | 89.0 |
| Female | 239 | 10.6 |
| Unknown | 7 | 0.3 |
| Trans male to female | 2 | 0.1 |
| Trans female to male | 1 | 0.0 |
| | 2264 | **100.0** |
| Non-binary | 2 | 0.1 |
| | 2264 | **100.0** |

| Victim visual ethnicity | N | % |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. White - North European | 1056 | 46.6 |
| Not recorded | 930 | 41.1 |
| 3. Black | 32 | 1.4 |
| 0. Unknown | 184 | 8.1 |
| 2. White - South European | 32 | 1.4 |
| 4. Asian | 23 | 1.0 |
| 5. Chinese, Japanese, SE Asian | 5 | 0.2 |
| 6. Arabic or North African | 2 | 0.1 |
| | 2264 | **100.0** |

| Victim self ethnicity | n | % |
| --- | --- | --- |
| W1. White British | 1235 | 54.5 |
| Not recorded | 699 | 30.9 |
| W3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller | 2 | 0.1 |
| M1. White & Black Caribbean | 2 | 0.1 |
| NS. Not stated | 243 | 10.7 |
| W9. Any other white background | 29 | 1.3 |
| W2. White Irish | 3 | 0.1 |
| B9. Any other Black background | 8 | 0.4 |
| A2. Asian - Pakistani | 3 | 0.1 |
| B1. Black Caribbean | 3 | 0.1 |
| O9. Any other ethnic group | 7 | 0.3 |
| A4. Chinese | 1 | 0.0 |
| A9. Any other Asian background | 10 | 0.4 |
| A1. Asian - Indian | 2 | 0.1 |
| O2. Arab | 1 | 0.0 |
| M9. Any other mixed background | 11 | 0.5 |
| M3. White & Asian | 5 | 0.2 |
| | 2264 | **100.0** |

| Victim offender | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Female-male | 1719 | 75.9 |
| Male-female | 119 | 5.3 |
| Male-male | 283 | 12.5 |
| Female-female | 118 | 5.2 |
| Trans female to male-male | 7 | 0.3 |
| Female-unknown | 5 | 0.2 |
| Female-trans male to female | 1 | 0.0 |
| Unknown-male | 3 | 0.1 |
| Trans male to female-female | 1 | 0.0 |
| Female-trans female to male | 1 | 0.0 |
| Non binary-male | 1 | 0.0 |
| Trans male to female-male | 2 | 0.1 |
| Male-unknown | 1 | 0.0 |
| Non binary-female | 1 | 0.0 |
| Unknown-unknown | 1 | 0.0 |
| Male-trans male to female | 1 | 0.0 |
| | 2264 | 100.0 |

| Offender self ethnicity | | % |
|---|---|---|
| W1. White British | 1144 | 50.5% |
| Not recorded | 652 | 28.8% |
| NS. Not stated | 323 | 14.3% |
| M1. White & Black Caribbean | 1 | 0.0% |
| B9. Any other Black background | 23 | 1.0% |
| A1. Asian - Indian | 1 | 0.0% |
| M9. Any other mixed background | 19 | 0.8% |
| W9. Any other white background | 47 | 2.1% |
| A3. Asian - Bangladeshi | 1 | 0.0% |
| M2. White & Black African | 2 | 0.1% |
| A9. Any other Asian background | 12 | 0.5% |
| O9. Any other ethnic group | 14 | 0.6% |
| B2. Black African | 3 | 0.1% |
| B1. Black Caribbean | 2 | 0.1% |
| W2. White Irish | 9 | 0.4% |
| A2. Asian - Pakistani | 4 | 0.2% |
| W3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller | 4 | 0.2% |
| M3. White & Asian | 3 | 0.1% |
| | 0 | 0.0% |
| | 2264 | 100.0% |

| Victim offender self ethnicity | | % |
|---|---|---|
| W1. White British-W1. White British | 673 | 29.7% |
| W1. White British-Not recorded | 309 | 13.6% |
| Not recorded-W1. White British | 326 | 14.4% |
| W3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller-W1. White British | 2 | 0.1% |
| M1. White & Black Caribbean-W1. White British | 1 | 0.0% |
| W1. White British-NS. Not stated | 172 | 7.6% |
| Not recorded-Not recorded | 269 | 11.9% |
| W1. White British-M1. White & Black Caribbean | 1 | 0.0% |
| NS. Not stated-W1. White British | 106 | 4.7% |
| Not recorded-B9. Any other Black background | 5 | 0.2% |
| Not recorded-A1. Asian - Indian | 1 | 0.0% |
| NS. Not stated-NS. Not stated | 79 | 3.5% |
| W9. Any other white background-W1. White British | 17 | 0.8% |
| W1. White British-B9. Any other Black background | 14 | 0.6% |
| W1. White British-M9. Any other mixed background | 10 | 0.4% |
| W1. White British-W9. Any other white background | 26 | 1.1% |
| Not recorded-M9. Any other mixed background | 5 | 0.2% |
| Not recorded-W9. Any other white background | 16 | 0.7% |
| W2. White Irish-NS. Not stated | 2 | 0.1% |
| B9. Any other Black background-A3. Asian - Bangladeshi | 1 | 0.0% |
| Not recorded-NS. Not stated | 61 | 2.7% |
| W1. White British-M2. White & Black African | 2 | 0.1% |
| W1. White British-A9. Any other Asian background | 3 | 0.1% |
| B9. Any other Black background-W1. White British | 4 | 0.2% |
| W1. White British-O9. Any other ethnic group | 11 | 0.5% |
| Not recorded-O9. Any other ethnic group | 3 | 0.1% |
| NS. Not stated-B2. Black African | 1 | 0.0% |
| NS. Not stated-Not recorded | 46 | 2.0% |
| NS. Not stated-W9. Any other white background | 4 | 0.2% |
| A2. Asian - Pakistani-Not recorded | 3 | 0.1% |
| Not recorded-A9. Any other Asian background | 7 | 0.3% |
| B1. Black Caribbean-Not recorded | 3 | 0.1% |
| NS. Not stated-B9. Any other Black background | 3 | 0.1% |
| NS. Not stated-A9. Any other Asian background | 2 | 0.1% |
| W1. White British-B1. Black Caribbean | 1 | 0.0% |
| Not recorded-W2. White Irish | 1 | 0.0% |
| O9. Any other ethnic group-Not recorded | 2 | 0.1% |
| A4. Chinese-Not recorded | 1 | 0.0% |
| M1. White & Black Caribbean-NS. Not stated | 1 | 0.0% |
| W1. White British-A2. Asian - Pakistani | 2 | 0.1% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| W1. White British-W3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller | 3 | 0.1% |
| A9. Any other Asian background-Not recorded | 6 | 0.3% |
| Not recorded-B2. Black African | 1 | 0.0% |
| A1. Asian - Indian-Not recorded | 1 | 0.0% |
| Not recorded-B1. Black Caribbean | 1 | 0.0% |
| NS. Not stated-M9. Any other mixed background | 1 | 0.0% |
| W1. White British-W2. White Irish | 7 | 0.3% |
| NS. Not stated-A2. Asian - Pakistani | 1 | 0.0% |
| Not recorded-W3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller | 1 | 0.0% |
| Not recorded-A2. Asian - Pakistani | 1 | 0.0% |
| W1. White British-B2. Black African | 1 | 0.0% |
| B9. Any other Black background-W2. White Irish | 1 | 0.0% |
| Not recorded-M3. White & Asian | 1 | 0.0% |
| W9. Any other white background-Not recorded | 7 | 0.3% |
| O2. Arab-W1. White British | 1 | 0.0% |
| M9. Any other mixed background-W1. White British | 5 | 0.2% |
| M3. White & Asian-Not recorded | 2 | 0.1% |
| M9. Any other mixed background-M3. White & Asian | 1 | 0.0% |
| W9. Any other white background-NS. Not stated | 3 | 0.1% |
| A1. Asian - Indian-W1. White British | 1 | 0.0% |
| W9. Any other white background-M3. White & Asian | 1 | 0.0% |
| M3. White & Asian-W9. Any other white background | 1 | 0.0% |
| O9. Any other ethnic group-W1. White British | 4 | 0.2% |
| M3. White & Asian-M9. Any other mixed background | 1 | 0.0% |
| A9. Any other Asian background-W1. White British | 2 | 0.1% |
| M3. White & Asian-W1. White British | 1 | 0.0% |
| M9. Any other mixed background-Not recorded | 1 | 0.0% |
| M9. Any other mixed background-NS. Not stated | 3 | 0.1% |
| M9. Any other mixed background-B9. Any other Black background | 1 | 0.0% |
| B9. Any other Black background-Not recorded | 2 | 0.1% |
| W9. Any other white background-M9. Any other mixed background | 1 | 0.0% |
| O9. Any other ethnic group-NS. Not stated | 1 | 0.0% |
| A9. Any other Asian background-NS. Not stated | 1 | 0.0% |
| W2. White Irish-W1. White British | 1 | 0.0% |
| A9. Any other Asian background-M9. Any other mixed background | 1 | 0.0% |
| | 2264 | 100.0% |

| Call source | | % |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 0 | 0.00% |
| Phone | 956 | 42.23% |
| 999 | 197 | 8.70% |
| Email | 73 | 3.22% |
| Radio | 16 | 0.71% |
| Other | 70 | 3.09% |
| Pct | 57 | 2.52% |
| Officer | 13 | 0.57% |
| Yellow p | 3 | 0.13% |
| Amb | 5 | 0.22% |
| Xa | 1 | 0.04% |
| Aban 999 | 1 | 0.04% |
| E-mail | 6 | 0.27% |
| 101 | 10 | 0.44% |
| Callback | 1 | 0.04% |
| Online | 1 | 0.04% |
| Person | 1 | 0.04% |
| D101 | 4 | 0.18% |
| | 849 | 37.50% |
| | 2264 | 100.0% |

| Priority merged desc | | % |
|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 0 |
| 2 - Priority Response | 889 | 39.27% |
| 3 - Agreed Deferred Response | 23 | 1.02% |
| 4 - Resolved / No Deployment | 428 | 18.90% |
| 1 - Emergency Response | 74 | 3.27% |
| 5 - Non-Graded | 1 | 0.04% |
| | 849 | 37.50% |
| | 2264 | 100.0% |

# APPENDIX III – QUALITATIVE INCIDENT DATA

| Incident category | Age and gender of young people | Details of the incident | Details of the investigation | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attempted rape | 14 year-old boy and 13 year-old girl | The boy asked the girl to go to a private room at a party. They had previously shared nudes. They engaged in sexual activity and the girl later told a friend that she didn't want to but 'went along with it'. It involved the boy 'pretending to put his penis inside' of the girl and oral sex. The girl's mother overheard her telling her friend and reported it to the school. | DSL informed police. The girl refused to provide evidence/statement. The school assessed that the girl was at no further risk from the boy. The police didn't interview the boy due to the lack of a statement. | Matter closed. Left with school for ongoing safeguarding. |
| Sexual assault | 17 year-old boy and 16 year-old girl | The boy and girl had been at a party at the girl's house. The boy told the girl he couldn't get himself home and wanted to stay in her bedroom. He slept in her bed and 'did things to her physically that she didn't want to do.' The girl told a friend who told her to report to a teacher. The DSL reported to police. | Neither the girl nor her mother wanted any formal action - the girl said she felt uncomfortable and embarrassed. Her mother was providing her with support. They said it was okay for the police to informally speak to the boy and informally warn him against further action of this kind, but no statement provided. The girl was deemed vulnerable due to mental health problems. | No further action - the police couldn't speak to the boy due to the 'nature of the offence' and the lack of a statement. Referral to social services for support but no action taken by them because it was deemed 'not overly concerning'. |
| Sexual assault | 15 year-old boy and 14 year-old girl | The girl was forced by the boy to 'touch his penis to masturbate'. She said she did not consent at all. She told her doctor, who told her mother, who reported it to the school. Peers at school became aware of the incident and were 'talking about it'. The girl was upset and said it was negatively affecting her peer relationships and she was feeling overwhelmed, anxious and stressed, and she had been self-harming. | School to put into place safeguarding for the girl but 'no further action' by police because the girl did not support formal police action and no statement provided. The girl said she felt guilty for causing extra work for the school and police. It was identified that she had previously made an allegation of sexual assault that was found to be untrue. Her mother said she was 'stepping back' and letting the school and police decide what to do. The police had a video-conferencing call with the boy and his mother. The boy denied the allegation. The girl thanked the police for interviewing him. | No further action due to lack of evidence (no witnesses, CCTV and report was made too late for forensic evidence) and no victim statement |
| Sexual assault | 16 year-old girl and 14 year-old boy | The girl told peers that she was having sex with the boy and an anonymous person reported it to police. The girl was already known to social services. | Police referred the case to social services as a 'child protection' rather than criminal issue. Both parties were spoken to. The boy said the sexual activity was consensual but his mother doesn't approve of the relationship. The father of the girl said he was aware of the relationship and believed it was consensual. The boy had mental health issues and had previously been a victim of a sexual assault. | No further action by police and social services to deal with the case with the families involved. |

| Crime - other | 16 year-old girl and various male peers | The girl sent a topless photo of herself to several boys at her school. The boys distributed the images further. The school found out and reported to police. | The school had confiscated the boys' phones and asked the police if they could be returned. The police said it 'isn't advisable because the images may still be on the phones'. Divisional police officers went to speak to the young people involved. The school had already provided education to students about not sending nudes and wanted police to 'reinforce the message'. The parents of the girl and the boys were 'generally receptive' and 'recognised it was a criminal offence'. | Police provided 'words of advice' but otherwise no further action. |
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| Sexual assault | 14 year-old boy 14 year-old girl | The girl did not return to her family home one night and when her mother phoned her, she told her mother that she'd been sexually assaulted by her boyfriend. The incident 'happened outside somewhere' and involved the boy pushing the girl's head toward his groin after having taken his trousers off. | The girl was on a child protection plan and was receiving services from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for mental health problems. She had previously been sexually assaulted by a relative. Her youth worker told police that she was 'very vulnerable' and when she gets into 'difficult circumstances', she 'finds it difficult to get out of them'. It was agreed between all parties that further formal police involvement would increase her vulnerabilities. The victim did not provide a statement. The boy was arrested for an unrelated offence of drug possession. | No further action due to lack of a statement and the girl's vulnerabilities. Referral back to social services. |
| Child protection incident | 13 year-old boy and 14 year-old girl | The girl told her teacher that she had felt pressured to have unwanted sex with the boy after 'repeated requests' from the boy, to which she 'acquiesced' despite feeling 'uncomfortable.' | DSL felt it 'wasn't rape' because there were not any 'threats or coercion'. The boy said that he thought it was consensual and police 'gave him advice about future relationships and consent'. | Police deemed it not in the public interest to proceed because otherwise both parties may have been proceeded against for 'underage sex'. Police 'handed it back to the school to deal with' and shared the incident with social services. |
| Child protection incident | Various young people 'of school age' | A boy asked a girl to send him an image and then distributed it to peers. A boy who had been sent the image told the school, who reported it to police because the boy was continuing to ask peers for images. | The girl did not want action taken and neither did her parents. The boy admitted to sending on the image and that he knew doing so 'was wrong', according to his parents who said this to the school. The girl said the boy pressured her to send the image. Police spoke informally to the boy and the girl directly involved. | Police told the boy to 'write a letter of apology' to all involved. Otherwise, no further action and passed back to the school to do 'training and safeguarding'. 'Outcome 16'. No further action but 'strong words of advice.' |

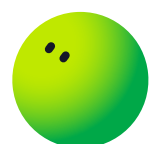| Sexual offence | 14 year-old girl and unknown person online | The girl was speaking to an anonymous person online who said they went to the same school. The person asked her to 'speak dirty' to them and they 'sexted' for a while. The person then threatened to share the exchange publicly unless the girl sent him nudes and asked her for money. The girl told her mother who reported it to police. | The police made a request through Instagram to find out who the anonymous account belonged to and reviewed the girl's phone for evidence. The girl said the incident made her feel suicidal and she was receiving mental health support, with a potential diagnosis of ADHD or autism. The girl and her mother weren't happy with the school safeguarding action and felt the school wasn't doing enough. | Police couldn't identify the owner of the account and so no further action. No recorded interaction between the police, school or any other services. |
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| Sexual assault | 17 year-old boy and 16 year-old girl | The boy non-consensually touched the girl's leg in a classroom. The girl told another student who told her to tell the school. The DSL reported to police. | Incident linked to two other allegations of rape against the boy made by two other girls. These rapes were alleged to have taken place at parties where the boy and the girls involved had been drinking alcohol. Two separate occasions. There were various delays with interviewing the boy but when interviewed, he denied all allegations. Regarding one of the alleged rapes, he said that it was malicious allegation after he commenced a relationship with a new partner. He said that the sexual activity had been consensual and that the girl involved 'was rough with him' and injured him. He showed the police pictures of his scratches and bruises. With the other girl, the condom they were using had split and he carried on having sex with her. The boy's peers were threatening him following the allegations and 'calling him a rapist.' His father was concerned and reported it to the police. Both the girls in the linked rape allegations were supporting police action. | No further action. Lack of evidence that the boy knowingly engaged in non-consensual sex. Regarding the incident involving the split condom, it was deemed 'disrespectful' but not 'non-consensual' behaviour. All parties informed of the outcome and 'relevant referrals made' but unclear to which services. |
| Child protection incident | 14 year-old girls | Intoxicated at a party. One of the girls was self-harming and her trousers and underwear fell down. Other girls recorded it and told her to 'finger herself.' A girl who was sent the video informed the school, who reported it to police. | Police spoke to the girls involved and their families. | Police deemed it not in the public interest to proceed because of the girls' age and 'where it happened', i.e., 'a private dwelling'. Instead, the school implemented safeguarding and the girls were told it was wrong. The video was deleted. There was a referral to 'youth support' for the 'risky behaviour' by the girl in the video. |

| Sexual offence | 14 year-old boy and 14 year-old girl | The girl felt pressured to send nude images to the boy. She told the school and said she felt distressed. The boy had also sent her an image of himself. The girl had told a friend, who told her to report it to the school and the school reported to police. The girl said she was 'scared to go to school' and was being 'bullied' by peers. | The police spoke to the girl and the boy, and their parents and endeavoured to deal with the incident 'sensitively.' The boy said he didn't ask for images but they had been sharing images on Snapchat. | No further action but 'strong words of advice' given to both parties and the youth engagement officer delivered education in the school on 'sexting' and 'associated bullying'. |
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| Crime - other | 12 year-old boy and 12 year-old girl | The boy took a picture of his genitals and sent it to the girl and asked for images back. The school were made aware after 'rumours started going round about it.' The girl was distressed and uncomfortable talking about it. | Police spoke to both the girl and the boy and their parents. It was identified that the boy had been involved with other similar incidents with female students. | No further action - 'police don't look to prosecute children in circumstances such as these'. The matter was dealt with by school and referral to social services. |
| Sexual video | 14 year-old boy and 14 year-old girl | The girl and boy had sex consensually. It was recorded with the girl's consent but the boy then uploaded the video online. The girl's mother overheard her telling a friend about it on the phone and the mother reported to the police. | Victim supported police action. | Transferred to another force. |
| Sexual offence | 16 year-old boy and 13 year-old girl | The boy told his school that he met the girl online and they had sex. He thought she was 16 but afterwards, she told him she was actually 13. The boy told the school because he was worried about getting punished and had been having 'suicidal thoughts as a result.' | Police examined the boy's phone and tried to identify the girl for 'safeguarding'. They were unsuccessful with facial recognition matches. | No further action - police identified from messages between the girl and boy that he clearly thought was she 16 and there was 'insufficient evidence to suggest otherwise'. The boy was referred to mental health services for support. |

| Sexual offence | 14 year-old girls | A 'vulnerable' girl touched another 'vulnerable' girl's breasts. Both had disabilities and multiple needs. The incident took place in the girl's home - the other girl pulled her bra down. The other girl had previously made sexualised comments to the victim and had an eating disorder and had been encouraging the victim to 'starve herself'. | Neither the victim nor her mother wanted formal police action unless 'something was going to come of it' due to concerns it may worsen the victim's mental health. | Police deemed further police action 'not to serve a useful purpose' due to the vulnerabilities of those involved. Both girls and their families to continuing engaging with mental health services. The school was endeavouring to keep them apart and had given lessons to them on consent. |
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| Sexual assault | Historic offence - 14/15 year-old girl and 14/15 year-old boy | A 17 year-old girl alleged that when she was 14 or 15, a boy in her year group had committed a series of sexual assaults against her. Incidents involved repeated touching and forced digital penetration. The girl told a friend at the time who told her it was sexual assault and the girl told the school. | Police found no record of an incident being reported to the school and were concerned about potential negligence on the party of the school. The school said they didn't take action at the time because 'it was covid' and since, the boy had moved back to his native country in Eastern Europe. The girl was known to police already due to previous 'incidents' and the boy was known to them for vehicle theft. In the intervening period, the boy had moved back to the UK. There were multiagency records stating that the girl had been self-harming at the time. The school recorded that the girl did not want formal action taken against the boy and so they didn't take action. The boy denied it when spoken to by police and said he'd never had any interaction with the girl. The girl put forward some fellow pupils as witnesses, who said they remember there being unwanted touching and the girl saying no and that the boys had said on one occasion that 'she was wet' and bragged about it when confronted. The DSL said they do not remember the allegations but if they were made then they would have logged them. | No further action - 'one word against another', witness statements inconclusive and lack of evidence. |

| Sexual offence | 16 year-old girl and older unidentified boy | The girl reported that an older boy 'threatened her with sextortion'. Two years previously, they'd had sex after meeting online. The girl said she had bee 'bleeding and felt degraded and raped.' The girl alleges he was 18 at the time and she was 14, so potentially statutory rape. The boy had filmed the sexual activity and approached her in the street telling her to withdraw cash to give to him, otherwise he would distribute the recording. | Police went to great lengths to obtain CCTV evidence of the sextortion interaction between the girl and the boy. Also endeavoured to obtain digital evidence from the girl's phone. Potential suspects identified through CCTV but nothing from the phone. The CCTV evidence contradicted the girl's account - she was seen happy and smiling with the boy while withdrawing the money. She was later seen purchasing a phone. The girl's mother told police that she 'lies and steals' a lot. The police identified lots of 'undermining material' and the girl later said that the sextortion allegation was untrue but maintained the original rape allegation. | No further police action - police attempted to refer the girl to victim services several times but she refused. Referral made to mental health services. There was no forensic evidence for the rape allegation due to the timescales. |
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| Master occurrences | 16 year-old boy and 14 year-old girl | The girl and boy had been sharing numerous nude images with each other and had sent them to other young people, who had been sending images back. The young people were all at the same school and were identified as having mental health issues. The DSL found out about the image sharing and reported it to police. | The police were unable to obtain the images because they had all been deleted. It was considered difficult for the police to identify who the victims and perpetrators were in the incidents. The girl was disappointed that they were not immediately talking to the boy about the incidents. The girl and her mother said that they felt the girl was being treated like a 'suspect'. | Not in the public interest to proceed - lack of evidence and 'all parties preferred to put the matter behind them'. All given 'strong words of advice' by police and 'victim has learnt from the incident'. |
| Child protection incident | 16 year-old boy and 15 yearold girl | School reported consensual sex between the parties. They had since ended their relationship. | Parents were aware of the relationship but both sets of parents concerned about their children getting into trouble for sexual activity. Both families involved with social services. The DSL later refused to give further information to the police despite having originally reported it to police. Both parties were attending a 'special educational needs school' and were concerned they would be 'sent to prison'. Both had complex additional needs. Both lacked capacity although the boy more so than the girl. Unclear how the school came to find out about the incident. | No further action - not in the public interest, school not providing further information and police concluded that the school had in place the necessary safeguarding and education on sex, relationships and consent. 'Age-appropriate relationship and support in place'. |

| Sexual assault | 12 year-old boy and 14 year-old girl | The girl told the school that she had been assaulted by the boy. Both parties had special needs/autism and were friends. There was alleged sexual touching of the girl by the boy, including digital penetration. The girl told her mother, who told the school, who reported it. | The incident was alleged to be non-consensual but the girl's mother 'did not understand' why the girl 'kept meeting with the boy'. There were concerns from the school about delays by police in questioning the girl, who they identified as needing counselling. The girl and her parents did not consent to social services involvement due to 'trauma' from previous involvement. An intermediary was required for police questioning of the girl because she struggled to answer their questions. The boy was educated remotely at one point due to there being two outstanding allegations against him. He denied both this and the other allegations when interviewed by police. The girl's mother was a judge and felt that any further formal police action was inadvisable due to low likelihood of charge, prosecution and conviction and the lengthy delays that are likely to arise. The girl then withdrew her statement. | No further action - lack of evidence. Referred back to the schoo lfor safeguarding. |
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| Rape/ assault | 15 year-old boy and 15 year-old girl | The girl told her friend that she'd had non-consensual sex with the boy. The friend told her to tell the school. The girl told her mother and wrote 'anal sex' on paper to convey to her mother what had happened - she'd said 'no' to the boy but he'd proceeded with anal sex. The incident took place at the boy's home. | The girl didn't want formal police action but were happy with them talking to the boy informally.  The police were seemingly liaising predominantly with the girl's mother. The mother told police that the girl's mental health had been 'deteriorating' and rumours had spread at her school about the incident. The boy and girl had been in a relationship at the time. Incident had taken place a year ago - weren't currently in a relationship but still at the same school together. The boy submitted a prepared statement and gave a 'no comment interview' to police. The boy's mother said she was present at the home when the incident was alleged to have taken place and that she saw the girl and she 'didn't look upset'. The mother and the boy were 'very upset' about the allegations and said it was false. No further incidents disclosed or recorded since. | No further action - girl didn't support formal action, lack of forensic evidence due to timescales involved. Referral to children's services by the school. The boy suspected to have autism and needed a 'frank conversation about consent'. The girl was referred to victim services. |

| Sexual assault | 14 year-old boys | One of the boys been making sexually aggressive comments to the other and on one occasion, put his hand down the boy's trousers and touched his genitals. The boy was uncomfortable and anxious. Both were 'vulnerable SEND pupils'. | The DSL described the boy alleged to have assaulted the other as a 'compulsive liar and manipulator'. The police said they could give a warning or proceed formally. The mother of the boy who was assaulted said that the former may be better due to the stress caused to the boy and the mother just wanted the other boy to stay away from him. | No further action - school safeguarding through keeping apart the boys and preventing the boy from going into the 'school silent room' where the incident took place. Police deemed it not in the children's best interest to proceed criminally due to their mental health needs and the victim's reluctance. |

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