

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg ynghylch aflonyddu rhywiol rhwng cyfoedion ymysg dysgwyr](#)
This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners](#)

PPSH 16

Ymateb gan: Barnardos Cymru

Response from: Barnardos Cymru

Nodwch eich barn mewn perthynas â chylch gorchwyl yr ymchwiliad, sydd wedi'u grwpio'n 5 thema: | Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference, which have been grouped into 5 themes:

1. Maint | Scale
2. Effaith | Impact
3. Effeithiolrwydd ymyriadau | Effectiveness of interventions
4. Y cyd-destun ehangach | Wider context
5. Arall | Other

Barnardo's Cymru
Senior Policy and Public Affairs Lead

The answers provided in this consultation response are drawn from experience and expertise from our services [Barnardo's Better Futures](#), and [Vale school and community-based counselling](#).

Better Futures provides assessment and longer-term therapeutic intervention services for children and young people with sexualised histories across Wales, including young people who have been the victims of sexual abuse; young people who display problematic or Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB); and young people who are at risk of or are abused through Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE).

Vale school and community-based counselling supports young people aged 10-19 who live or go to school in the Vale of Glamorgan.



1. Maint | Scale

Barnardo's service Better Futures receives a phone call or email from a school looking for support on this issue at least several times a week, which is a strong indication of the scale of the problem. Whilst we welcome the fact that Everyone's Invited shone a light on this, it is not a new issue for our services. There have always been high incidents of school-based harassment which Barnardo's Cymru have supported children and young people with.

Barnardo's has been supporting both children who are victims of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) and those who harm for decades. In 2016, Barnardo's supported a Parliamentary Inquiry chaired by Nus Ghani MP into support and sanctions for children who display harmful sexual behaviour¹. We found that abuse between children and young people was significantly underreported, largely because discussing sexual violence was still seen as 'taboo', victims fear being punished or treated as perpetrators, and teachers often 'brush off' incidents of sexual assaults or sexually threatening behaviour because of the young age of the perpetrators.

¹ https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/now_i_know_it_was_wrong_0.pdf



It is our experience that often, schools are looking for support but the threshold for a statutory intervention from the police or social services is not met, meaning that schools have few options other than to look to services such as Better Futures. Schools regularly ask for Barnardo's Cymru to provide training to their staff. This is something that we provide as often as possible, although we are not funded as a preventative service and therefore our capacity to respond to the need can be stretched at times.

This means that there is reliance on a piecemeal approach to supporting schools to deal with these issues, and given that schools often approach looking for support when there is an emergency or a crisis, there is often therefore a pressing need for support of some kind at the point that contact is made.

2. Effaith | Impact

- The impact on pupils' learning, mental health and well-being.
- The impact on education settings and staff, for example in terms of discipline and the extent to which harassment among learners has become 'normalised'.
- The specific impacts on particular groups of learners (e.g., older pupils, girls, LGBTQ+ pupils, etc.).

Many calls that we receive raising concerns are regarding children who are younger than secondary age – often eight or nine years old.

Our Gobaith² research found that when the threshold for statutory support is crossed, it is typically the third time that a professional has been concerned about a child. Better Futures is currently undertaking a pilot project with a local authority to address this by creating a preventative service and developing a pathway for the local authority to implement.

Vale school-based counselling report that the impact of peer-on-peer sexual harassment is significant – both on schools and learners. Schools are 'often left floundering' as they try to deal with having young people on both sides of an issue or complaint still in school together. They reported examples of trying to manage timetables to

² 'Gobaith' A Barnardo's CSA Core Priority Practice Development Project in relation to children and young people with harmful sexual behaviour. Discovery Report – 2019



keep young people apart, and attempting to take appropriate action without implying blame on either party.

The service also reported that there is a knock-on impact on attendance.

School-based counsellors find that incidents often grow in scale and impact due to the repercussions from information shared on social media, gossip and shame/stigma.

In our Boys 2 research³, we found that boys receive gendered responses to their behaviour, which has a detrimental impact on them. Girls generally received a more nurturing response for displaying the same behaviours, whereas boys would be treated more punitively such as being sent out of class, excluded, etc. Boys were also less likely to be asked about what was underpinning the behaviour in an effort to try to understand that young person's experiences.

We have heard from LGBTQ+ young people in our services that they feel unable to raise questions about sexuality in schools, and face concerns about bullying and ridicule.

Through our services across Wales, we also know of a number of cases where a young person wishes to transition but has no support to do so. In many of these cases, a project worker will try to put together a support network in their own time and outside the defined realms of their role. School-based counsellors have also reported that they have seen an increase in abuse/bullying linked to gender identity or identifying as LGBTQ+.

SEND children and young people who have disabilities and special educational needs are at an increased risk of being abused compared with their non-disabled peers. Research shows that disabled children including those with learning difficulties, are three to four times more likely to experience abuse. To add to this, children with disabilities and special educational needs are much more likely to keep their abuse hidden and remain unidentified. They are also more likely to exhibit harmful behaviours themselves. Research by Stop it Now showed that: *'Those with learning disabilities and autism also tend to be over-represented amongst young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. Around half of young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour have experienced sexual abuse themselves'*.⁴

³ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/boys-2-report-developing-resources-tools-identify-young-males-risk-child-sexual-exploitation-abuse.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/concerned-about-a-child-or-young-persons-sexual-behaviour/preventing-harmful-sexual-behaviour/>



3. Effeithiolrwydd ymyriadau | Effectiveness of interventions

Over the last 18 months, we have anecdotally observed that the ability of schools to respond to cases of peer abuse and harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) has continued to decline apart from in the most acute cases.

Also, where thresholds for statutory intervention are not met, cases are sent to preventative family support services who do not hold the necessary skills, training and expertise to properly support a young person's needs. Alternatively, that young person may be sent down a youth justice route which is deeply problematic and undermines Welsh Government's ambition that every child be treated first and foremost as a child with a safeguarding approach which supports this.

We stand behind Welsh Government's ambitions on tackling issues around CSA/CSE/HSB in Wales, and find that Welsh Government is often a leader in terms of policy and guidance. However, the aspiration contained in this guidance is predicated on an ability to respond from the social care workforce, and we believe that this is significantly stretched beyond capacity.

We fully support Welsh Government's ambitions in this area, but implementation is a concern. At best, a school can be expected to increase awareness and improve confidence and training within their teaching staff, but schools cannot provide an effective safeguarding response. This is where statutory services should be able to step in, but capacity – both in terms of training and of resource – is stretched to the point where it is difficult to meet Welsh Government's ambition on the ground.

Better Futures is often asked by schools to deliver lessons directly to children because teachers lack confidence in addressing the issues. Teachers also tell us that they would rather a child raise a safeguarding concern with Barnardo's, rather than them, as we can more easily respond to it. In our experience, when delivering these sessions, there is often a peak in disclosures from students. This is as a result of creating a safe and open space for children and young people to consider their experiences and share them with someone who can support. It is vital that teachers can provide this in schools.



We are pleased to see a move, through the whole-school approach to mental health, to employing specialist teachers to deliver these parts of the new curriculum, and we think this will make a huge difference to students' experiences. They need teachers who can confidently talk to them about sex and relationships and support them as necessary. However, it is important to note that we may not see the results of these changes to the way schools provide education and support for another decade. Teaching young children about healthy relationships is vital, but we must still invest in secondary, responsive services for those cohorts of young people who are already undertaking behaviours or subject to them.



4. Y cyd-destun ehangach | Wider context

We welcome the new Curriculum for Wales in engaging with children and young people about healthy and safe relationships, although we raise concerns about schools' ability to deliver this given the regular calls received by Better Futures, and the disruption caused to schools and learners through the pandemic.

In our consultation responses on the new Curriculum for Wales we flagged concerns about the vastly different way of working that would be needed in schools, and the investment that would be needed to sustain this. We have also noted the amount of time it will take for us to demonstrably see the results of this change.

In many of the cases that we see, peer abuse in schools is something that has tipped over from outside of school or online, and the lines between these two worlds have become blurred. School-based counsellors agree that the separation between home and school is increasingly blurred due to social media, and that in many cases that they encounter include a young person who is distressed and suffering because of an incident that has taken place online, such as image sharing. School-based counsellors work with young people to help play a role in educating and undertaking safety planning for the future, alongside their counselling function.

In 2015/16 pornography was accessed 1.4 million times by UK children every month. That number is likely to be higher now due to the increase in time spent online during and post pandemic.

We have seen cases of children as young as 7–12 accessing information online. LGBTQ+ young people are particularly likely to explore and seek answers online because of a lack of resources in other places, including schools. We have seen children criminalised and/or come to harm in these spaces as a result of them exploring and seeking answers.

In considering the wider context, it is also important to consider the life experiences of young people. Our research has shown that children that display harmful behaviours have often experienced harm themselves. Often, a child will cross the lines between being a victim of peer abuse and carrying out such behaviours. Many children who exhibit harmful behaviours will often have themselves been victims of domestic abuse, neglect and other forms of abuse. Our practitioners say that HSB can start with children googling images related to their own abuse – before then going on to abuse others.



5. Arall | Other

We would stress the need to take into account a child's whole life experiences when engaging with them around peer abuse and HSB, and ensure that all possible steps are taken to treat them as a child first and foremost.

