

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales  
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and  
Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg |  
Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

CYPE 41

Ymateb gan : Y Gymdeithas Genedlaethol er Atal Creulondeb i Blant Cymru  
(NSPCC Cymru)

Response from : National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children  
Cymru (NSPCC Cymru)

NSPCC Cymru/Wales welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Children, Young People and Education Committee Inquiry on its priorities for the next 12-18 months.

We're working to create safer childhoods for every child in Wales and strengthen the delivery of children's rights. We believe that this can be achieved by all partners working to prevent, protect and play a part. Together, we can end child abuse.

Children and young people have a right to participate in the matters that affect them and we all have a responsibility to ensure that their voices are heard. We are therefore pleased that the Fifth Assembly has a dedicated Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee. We believe it is vital that the work of this Committee utilises a children's rights framework and that recommendations from the Committee's work clearly identify when children's rights are being realised or infringed. To make the best use of resources we would also recommend joint and co-operative inquiries with other committees. In that vein we have suggested four priorities for the Committee and the first two would be particularly suited to joint work with other Committees.

We hope that these suggestions will be useful to the Committee as it determines its priorities for the next 12-18 months. We would be pleased to discuss any of the areas we have outlined in our response in further detail if that would be of help to the Committee.

## 1. Inquiry into the impact of sexual harassment/violence on children in Wales

- Data published in September 2015 revealed that 5,500 sexual offences were recorded in UK schools over a three year period, including 600 rapes.<sup>1</sup>
- In a study of young people by the NSPCC (2009), a quarter of the girls and 18 per cent of the boys experienced physical abuse; three quarters of the girls and 14 per cent of the boys experienced physical abuse, and a third of the girls and 16 per cent of the boys experienced some form of sexual partner violence.<sup>2</sup>
- A further study<sup>3</sup> in 2015 found rates of 41% amongst girls and 14% amongst boys experiencing some form of sexual partner violence. The 2015 study also measured the sending and receiving of sexual images/messages. In the UK sample 38% of young people had sent a sexual image/message to a partner and 48% had received one.
- Data from the NSPCC's ChildLine service reveals a culture of sexual harassment which, starting from their school relationships, extends across the spectrum of children's experiences, including online. It can leave them isolated, with many having no outlet to escape abuse.

At Westminster, the Women and Equalities Committee has recently conducted an inquiry into sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, with the final recommendations and report still to be published. There is currently no national data so an inquiry remains one of the only means of getting a clear picture of the scale of the problem as well as the actions that should be taken to reduce the levels of sexual harassment/violence in schools. **Given that education is devolved, NSPCC Cymru/Wales would suggest that there would be significant merit in conducting a similar inquiry focused on Wales and the Welsh policy context and we would recommend that the Children, Young People and Education Committee explore the option of a joint inquiry with the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee.** We would also propose that a limitation of the Westminster study was its singular focus on schools, we would suggest that there could be merit making the inquiry in Wales age-based not context based to allow for the inclusion of the role of youth centres and services in supporting children and young people in the scope of the inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-34138287>

<sup>2</sup> *Barter et al (2009)*: School-based cross-sectional survey of 1500 young people aged 13 to 17 in England, Scotland and Wales and 80 interviews with young people (NSPCC funded);

<sup>3</sup> *Barter et al (2015)*: School-based cross-sectional European survey of 4,500 young people aged 14-17 in England, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Italy and Norway and 100 interviews with young people (EU funded).

## 1.1 Understanding the scale of the problem in Wales

In Wales, the 'Boys and Girls Speak Out' (2013) research carried out on behalf of the National Assembly for Wales Cross Party Group on Children's Sexuality, Sexualisation and Equalities (funded by NSPCC Cymru/Wales, Cardiff University and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales) revealed that most children age 10-12 reported either witnessing or experiencing direct or indirect incidents of sexual harassment, particularly slut-shaming and anti-gay talk (at school, in the street, and online), with gender stereotypes used by children and some staff to justify these forms of harassment. Overall the research found that children were ill-equipped to deal with sexual harassment and very few felt comfortable talking about these issues with parents or teachers. It also added to growing research evidence that patterns of sexual coercion and harassment are not confined to **older teens** but are also emerging in the everyday lives of **pre-teen children**.

However, this study remains some of the only research available to help us build a picture of the situation in Wales. Moreover, this study was an exploratory project with 125 children (age 10-12) and there remains no quantitative data set for the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence in schools in Wales. Despite this, there have been a series of developments in Wales that make this topic particularly timely. Last year saw the introduction of the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 which includes provisions to be able to require local authorities to publish prescribed information to show how their education functions are being exercised to promote the purposes of the legislation as well as the publication of Welsh Government Guidance on Whole School Approaches developed with Welsh Women's Aid. Work is also ongoing in the development of the Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience under the new curriculum for Wales.

## 1.2 The role of schools and other youth services

We all have a responsibility to ensure that children are safe. The fact that schools form such a fundamental part of children's lives means that school staff and communities have an especially important role. It is at school that children will form many of the relationships and learn many of the behaviours which will have an important bearing on how they make the transition into adulthood.

Qualitative analysis of the NSPCC's ChildLine service reveals how harmful sexual behaviour directly impacts on a young person's wellbeing if left unchecked and allowed to escalate. Many got in touch after experiencing inappropriate sexual touching and verbal threats that occur on school buses, in the playground, toilets, changing rooms, and in classrooms during lessons. Girls told ChildLine about their private areas being touched and having sexually explicit things said to them. This could sometimes escalate

into more threatening behaviour. Many girls also reported feeling vulnerable, anxious, and confused about being pressurised for sex by boys at school. Some feel that they should consent as their peers all talked about being sexually active. Others were threatened with physical violence if they refused and had rumours and lies spread about them.

As with bullying and homophobia/transphobia, we need to be protecting children from harmful sexual behaviour and ensuring they can rely on staff to support them when things go wrong or they feel unsafe. It is also crucial to remember that schools are nurturing children through a critical period in their lives when they are actively negotiating and learning about the ways sexuality affects them and their lives.

However, we believe that schools also need to work in partnership with the family and the wider community, to fulfil their responsibility to make sure that children can explore these important shifts in a healthy, positive way, and without fear of harassment and violence. We therefore believe that it would be beneficial to broaden the scope of the inquiry to also include the wider community to allow youth centres and communities to feed in their views and think about how they may form a key part of the solutions needed.

### **1.3 Understanding the online aspects of these issues**

We also believe that the online aspects of these issues needs to be much better understood and we would like to see this as a key plank of the inquiry we are suggesting. We believe that it is important to the online element as a key part of the whole picture of reducing sexual harassment/violence. Data from ChildLine provides a sense of the relevance of the online element to some of these issues:

- In 2015/2016 ChildLine carried out 1,392 counselling sessions relating to sexting, an increase of 15 per cent on the previous year.
- The 'sexting' advice page is the most viewed page on the ChildLine website.
- In 2015/16 ChildLine carried out 25,740 counselling sessions where the main concern was bullying or online bullying.
- In 2015/16 ChildLine carried out 7,357 counselling sessions where children had raised concerns over online safety or cyber bullying.
- In 2014/15 ChildLine carried out 1,129 counselling sessions with children had raised concerns about being exposed to sexually explicit online images and/or content.<sup>4</sup>

The internet has a huge bearing on how children interact with one another. Schools should therefore have policies in place which address how technology such as social media can be used to perpetrate abuse both inside

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<sup>4</sup> Last year around 1.2 million children and young people contacted the NSPCC's Childline service resulting in over 300,000 in-depth counselling sessions.

school and outside in the wider community. Work through the HWB website is positive and we would like to see this go further so that online and digital safety should be provided as a compulsory part of the school curriculum as part of wider efforts to develop a whole school ethos focussed on increasing young people's awareness and understanding of the motivations, consequences and risks of some online behaviour. We would like to see schools ensuring that children and young people are able to recognise abusive, coercive and exploitative online behaviour, and understand what constitutes inappropriate behaviour and relationships online. Children also need guidance on blocking unwanted sexual approaches, not being drawn in by manipulative behaviours, understanding what coercive and controlling behaviour can look like online, and know where to report suspicious activity and access support.

Schools also need to have clear reporting mechanisms for both on and off-line abuse that have clearly signposted support services (both in school and outside of school). All of this should be developed with young people, parents and teachers.

#### **1.4 Delivering changes to reduce sexual harassment/violence in schools in Wales**

Understanding the interaction of all of these areas sits at the heart of what is described as a 'whole school approach' and the Welsh Government Whole Education Approach Guidance issued in 2015 is very welcome as was subsequent guidance for Governors. We believe however, it is important to unpick the practical steps schools need to take to successfully deliver all of the different elements of a whole school approach, and understand where the prevention of sexual harassment and violence sits within this scope. It is also important to understand the needs of schools and teachers to help them embed and deliver this approach successfully, consistently and safely. A core and mandatory curriculum co-produced with children and young people delivered by appropriately trained practitioners is needed to ensure ALL school age children and young people receive a comprehensive and inclusive sexuality and relationships education that addresses the complex ways in which inter-personal gender-based and sexual harassment impacts upon their lives. As part of this, schools also need to be supported to incorporate innovative approaches.

Given that currently, PSE (and a comprehensive healthy relationships education programme) is not mandatory and as such, provision is at the discretion of each individual school, many teachers may find both time and resources for training hard to negotiate. Mandatory and regular training for all staff on by experts in the field of gender and sexuality education, violence against girls and women, and LGBTQA+ and transgender+ is imperative for the implementation of any education approach and the whole-school approaches described above. There also needs to be clear guidance on how to create safe spaces for children to talk about and challenge everyday sexism and sexual harassment.

**The development of the new Curriculum and the process of national and local implementation of provisions contained in the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act suggest that our proposed inquiry for Wales would be extremely timely.** Indeed, the Welsh Government draft National strategy on Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence: A framework for delivery 2016-21 recently issued for consultation states: *“To enable us to prevent violence and abuse in the future, we have to focus on children, to make sure they understand what constitutes a healthy relationship and how to recognise the symptoms of unhealthy relationships.”* Developments in Wales seem to be recognising the vital importance of prevention and focusing on children as core to tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence. We therefore believe the sort of inquiry we are suggesting could be especially relevant to inform and support the practical steps needed to support the implementation of these developments. We believe this inquiry could help boost understanding about the scale and nature of these issues in schools in Wales as well as help to inform decisions about training needs, resources and the requirements around evaluation/inspection of delivery to support consistent implementation of the legislation that has been developed in Wales in recent years. Policies, guidance and duties do not automatically translate into practice and they need support to be successfully embedded. While good practice may exist, it can vary considerably across local authorities, individual schools and third sector service providers. Thus not only must any policy and programme for change developed be made mandatory but it also needs to be fully resourced, particularly in terms of the additional support services needed to cope with a potential increase in sexual harassment disclosures.

A fully resourced and regularly evaluated approach will be vital. We believe having a core mandatory curriculum, independently evaluated and inspected by Estyn (Wales) with evidenced based learning outcomes and resources is an essential part of ensuring consistency and quality. We believe this inquiry would be a timely means of assessing what needs to be in place to support this.

### **1.5 ‘Start from where we are at’ – Co-producing responses with children and young people**

Educational resources, strategies, practices and policies also need to connect with and capture children and young people’s own experiences. This can be achieved in a number of ways such as; commissioning and conducting research such as Girls and Boys Speak out, which foregrounds children’s views. Another route is for it to be facilitated through school-based activities where young people themselves collect evidence on how gender and sexual violence shape young people’s online and offline peer cultures. We also need to better understand the benefits when children and young people are able to be directly involved in co-production of pedagogy and where appropriate, its delivery. This includes for example, peer-led lessons to younger pupils, practitioners, school governors and administrative/ancillary staff. In a recent

survey, children and young people told us that existing PSE and SRE teaching is not covering the topics they want it to and is failing to give them the knowledge and understanding they require to protect themselves from abuse and exploitation. This is not just about information; appropriate information can also support behaviour change. High quality lessons taught from a rights and equality perspective in an age-appropriate way build self-esteem and awareness, giving children and young people the tools to make informed decisions and encouraging them not to engage in potentially harmful behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

Cardiff University (Professor Renold), NSPCC Cymru/Wales and Welsh Women's Aid, supported by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales have been working in partnership over the last year on the Starter Project which has developed a forthcoming guide '*Agenda: A Young People's Guide to Making Positive Relationships Matter*' (see <http://learning.gov.wales/resources/browse-all/keeping-learners-safe-conference-2015/?lang=en>). AGENDA will be launched in November 2016 at the Pierhead Building. AGENDA is intended to be a **change-making toolkit** for young people who wish to get involved in promoting gender well-being and gender equalities for respectful and healthy relationships. It is a resource that has been created with a diverse group of 12 young people across Wales and it features 11 case studies on projects developed by young people on a range of healthy relationship issues (e.g. FGM, sexual harassment, gender equality), interactive resources, and start-up ideas for young people to directly address the challenge of how to enable young people to safely express, communicate, and learn about the ways in which they can promote gender equalities in their schools and communities. Central to many of the case studies are the use of arts-based methods (e.g. via poetry, physical theatre, fiction, visual and digital art, movement, sound etc.). The AGENDA guide is not intended to be an information resource on what a healthy relationship is, but has been designed to highlight examples of the work young people are already doing to address these issues in order to inspire and support other young people to change what matters to them. AGENDA has been designed to showcase and provide practical examples of how change-making can be embedded in the learning process. As Professor Renold has highlighted, using creative methods not only has the potential to enable young people to communicate their experiences without revealing too much of themselves, but the artefacts they make can be widely shared and interacted with.

In light of the importance of making sure that provision is shaped by young people's own experiences and realities, we would recommend this inquiry should go further than the Westminster inquiry and ensure that young people are able to be directly involved in the Committee inquiry process. We appreciate that ways to facilitate and accommodate this will need to be

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<sup>5</sup>The Survey was carried out in 2013 by NSPCC in conjunction with the Telegraph. 678 young people responded to the survey. The survey did not exclude any geographical region and while it is difficult to guarantee responses are UK wide, they are representative of children who use the ChildLine website.

considered but we believe it is vitally important. Such an approach would be in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC and the child-rights centred approach to policy making in Wales. A further fresh approach could be to establish an online forum to hear the voices and capture the lived experiences of children and young people. Another approach could be to work with schools and youth centres across Wales to gather evidence from young people.

**We believe that our suggested inquiry into the impact of sexual harassment/violence on children and young people in Wales could naturally lend itself to a joint inquiry into carried out by the Communities, Equalities and Local Government Committee and the Children and Young People's Committee. The scope of the inquiry could be as follows and gather evidence on:**

- **The scale of sexual harassment/violence in primary, secondary schools communities in Wales, we would recommend taking an age-based rather than context-based approach**
- **Both the offline and online aspects of these issues and explore how they interact;**
- **Children and young people's experiences of sexual harassment/violence and gathering their views about the solutions needed;**
- **Exploring what is needed to support and resource the successful and effective implementation of recent legislative, policy and guidance developments in Wales and how to embed approaches to reduce the levels of sexual harassment/violence experienced by children and young people in Wales.**

## **2. Monitoring the implementation of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014.**

NSPCC Cymru/Wales welcomed the coming into force of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2016 in April 2016. We particularly welcome the focus on **prevention and early intervention** to enhance the wellbeing of people who need care and support.

We believe that influencing factors on an individual's behaviour can be identified and therefore it is possible to **prevent child abuse before it occurs**. Issues such as inadequate housing, adult mental health difficulties, poverty, domestic abuse, or substance misuse problems are all known risk factors for all forms of child abuse and neglect and so it is crucial to provide preventative services to **support families facing adversities** and we believe problems should be addressed early. Stressors often occur together and have a cumulative effect- the more of them there are in a family, the greater



the risk to the child.<sup>6</sup> Recent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)<sup>7</sup> research draws on growing evidence that experiences during childhood can affect health throughout the life course. Findings that adults in Wales who were physically or sexually abused as children or brought up in households where there was domestic violence, alcohol or drug abuse are more likely to adopt health-harming and anti-social behaviours in adult life underlines the importance in effective early interventions. This is likely to pay significant dividends that span learning, health and parenting of the next generation.

This is why we would strongly recommend that the Children, Young People and Education Committee **allocates some time in its work programme to monitor the implementation of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and its impact on the services provided for children and families.** Possible areas of scrutiny include:

- **Provision of prevention and early intervention services:** The Act requires local authorities to provide preventative services and we would be particularly interested to see the Committee scrutinise the process for planning and provision of preventative services. The population needs assessment produced by March 2017 will inform the area plans for prevention and early intervention. As the focus in the Act was on people having a say and more control on the support they require, we would recommend the Committee scrutinises how effectively the needs of children who need care and support are met, and how their voices and views are listened to.
- **Eligibility:** we would be particularly interested to see the Committee scrutinise how the new eligibility criteria for care and support are addressing the issues of “postcode lottery” and access to services, especially for vulnerable children and young people.
- **New duty to report people at risk:** we would like to see the Committee scrutinise how the new duty is being implemented, particularly in relation to children, with a particular focus on the number or referrals, at what stage they occur, and local authorities’ response and whether any additional guidance is needed for relevant partners.

We have already responded to the priorities consultation of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee suggesting this priority, but as our proposal is primarily focused on children, some of this scrutiny could be undertaken jointly.

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<sup>6</sup> Jutte, S., Bentley, H., Miller, P. and Jetha, N. (2014). How Safe Are Our Children (2014)? Data Briefing, Available from: <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/how-safe-children-2014-data-briefing.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Public Health Wales (2015) Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

We also noted the Minister's statement on monitoring the implementation of the Act last March and suggest that any monitoring undertaken by the Committee could complement that work.

### 3. Committee inquiry into support for parents in the early years in Wales

Child development is a dynamic process – through which a child is transformed from reacting to sensations and being dependent on carers to becoming independent and making sense of the world. Babies, children and young people have many needs, both physical and emotional. Meeting these needs is crucial for optimal child development. Babies and children need warm, responsive and sensitive parenting and a secure attachment to their care giver(s) to ensure they can fulfil their potential.

The former Chief Medical Officer in her 2015 annual report<sup>8</sup> stated that:

*'There is a wealth of evidence on the importance of getting things right in "the first 1,000 days", and focusing on this period as a mechanism to break the link between poverty and poor life course outcomes.'*

The first thousand days is the period from conception to the child's 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday. We know that crucial brain connections and the bonds between children and care givers are formed<sup>9</sup> in the first 1000 days. We also know that a baby's brain grows from 25 per cent of its adult size at birth to about 75 per cent of its adult size by the end of second year<sup>10</sup>. It is therefore unsurprising that research suggests that a child's development score at just 22 months can serve as an accurate predictor of educational outcomes at 26 years<sup>11</sup>.

That is why it is crucial we support all parents in Wales to develop warm, sensitive, responsive parenting skills in the first 1000 days. We support the former Wales' Chief Medical Officer's recommendation in 2015 that 'Health Boards and partners should have a 'First 1000 days plan'<sup>12</sup>.

It is particularly important to provide enhanced support to families facing adversities. As stated earlier, stressors often occur together and have a

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<sup>8</sup> Welsh Government (2015) Chief Medical Officer for Wales Annual Report 2014-15: Healthier, Happier, Fairer. Available from: <http://gov.wales/docs/phhs/publications/151014cmoreporten.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Welsh Government (2015) Chief Medical Officer for Wales Annual Report 2014-15: Healthier, Happier, Fairer. Available from: <http://gov.wales/docs/phhs/publications/151014cmoreporten.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> The Association for the Advancement of Automotive Medicine. An Overview of Anatomical Considerations of Infants and Children in the Adult World of Automobile Safety Design [Online] 1998. Available from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3400202/> [Accessed: August 24<sup>th</sup> 2015]

<sup>11</sup> Allen, G (2011). Early Intervention: The Next Steps. London: HMSO. Available from: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/284086/early-intervention-next-steps2.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/284086/early-intervention-next-steps2.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

cumulative effect and the recent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)<sup>13</sup> research draws on growing evidence that experiences during childhood can affect health throughout the life course. Effectively intervening in the early years to support parents is likely to pay significant dividends that span learning, health and parenting of the next generation.

We welcome the intensive support given to children aged 0-4 in Flying Start areas, but believe that **all parents of young children should be provided with effective support to develop their parenting skills and ensure a secure attachment between child and care giver(s)**. It is also vital that we know that the parenting support that is provided is effective. We believe that comprises of a range of universal services, an enhanced health visiting service together with targeted evidence-based programmes to help address issues early.

Universal services should include working with parents to build skills and effective strategies for coping with their children's behaviour in a positive, non-violent way. This would be very timely given that Welsh Government has indicated that it will introduce legislation to remove the defence of reasonable punishment in the second year of the Fifth Assembly term. An inquiry into parenting support in the early years and associated recommendations could be especially relevant within this context, as we know that the Minister has indicated to the Committee that he wishes to provide parents across Wales with a set of parenting tools and support resources.

## **4. How safe are Welsh children online? – Proposal for a committee inquiry into the harm and abuse facing Welsh children online**

### **4.1 Context**

**In 2015/16, there were over 11,000 Childline counselling sessions relating to online sexual abuse, cyber-bullying and internet safety, which was a 9% increase on the previous year. A third (3,716) of these counselling sessions were related to online sexual abuse.**

The internet can be extremely beneficial for children; they can use it to learn, communicate, develop, create and explore the world around them. However, too often, it also leaves them vulnerable to risks and exposes them to experiences which they find upsetting. **It is essential that we ensure children are afforded the same protection in the online world, as they are offline**; that they receive an age-appropriate, comparable level of adult protection, care and guidance in the online space as they do in the offline world.

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<sup>13</sup> Public Health Wales (2015) Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

**The NSPCC, through its ChildLine service, frontline service delivery and research, is increasingly concerned about the harm caused to children through online activity.** Too many children are exposed to dangerous and harmful content online, or are subjected to online harassment, grooming, and sexual exploitation. And while measures ranging from child protection legislation to regulatory tools such as age ratings for films and age restrictions for alcohol and cigarettes are rightfully seen as necessary in ensuring children are kept safe in the offline world, less consideration has been given to how similar tools could better protect children online.

It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that children are protected online from these risks, and are supported to build their resilience and provided with the tools to manage their online experiences. Industry bodies such as internet service providers and social media platforms, Government across each of the UK administrations, AMs, as well as parents and teachers must all share in their duty to support children to explore their world in a safe and age-appropriate way.

More immediate steps need to be taken to ensure that children are kept safe online. UK-wide we are pleased that Age Verification for pornography sites has been included in the UK Digital Economy Bill. This is an important step forward which the NSPCC welcomes however we have questions over how effective the proposed new law will be without blocking and criminal sanctions also included in the provisions. Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, which the NSPCC campaigned to include within the Act, which for the first time made it illegal for an adult to send a sexual communication to a child, has also yet to be commenced in spite of NSPCC lobbying.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales believes that the **National Assembly for Wales has a direct responsibility to ensure that Wales' children are safe online.** Despite this, and due to the absence of national baseline data we do not have a clear picture of the scale of the harm and abuse facing Welsh children online and how it is impacting on them. We believe a committee inquiry to gather evidence about: how safe Welsh children are online; the work that is being done in this space in Wales and what the Welsh Government is currently doing; would be a very useful means to build a clearer picture and help to ascertain the solutions needed at a Welsh level to keep our children safer online.

## **4.2 NSPCC and protecting children online**

It is a key priority for the NSPCC to keep children safe from abuse and harm online, with a focus on **online child sexual abuse, the creation and sharing of online child sexual abuse material, online child sexual exploitation include grooming and live streaming, online facilitated child abuse, online harassment and bullying, and inappropriate content online** (see Appendix for more information on this area). Our broader strategic priorities

are set around three outcomes on ensuring that more online service providers demonstrate best practice in relation to child safety online; more children know how to keep themselves safe online; and more adults know how to keep children safe online.

Our work is broad ranging from tackling the shocking prevalence of child abuse material online, to an innovative partnership with O2 to ensure their customers and parents more widely, are better supported in keeping their children safe online. NSPCC has committed to developing products such as Net Aware, which offers a guide to parents on 50 of the most popular social media sites, apps, and games, and Share Aware, which is designed to give parents of children aged 8 to 12 more support to keep their children safe online. Over 1.2 million children get in touch with our ChildLine service, or on average one every 25 seconds, giving us crucial insight and expertise into the nature and scale of the problems facing children today online. More than 70% of ChildLine counselling sessions with children now take place online, while the ChildLine website received 3.5 million visits in 2015/16.

We regularly hear from children about the negative impact that viewing inappropriate content has on them, as well as the impact of being subjected to online harassment, grooming and sexual exploitation. Inappropriate content includes pornography and violent and degrading portrayals of sex, as well as material which incites them to self-harm or compete to lose weight. Key insights from Childline include:

- In 2015/16, there were over 11, 000 Childline counselling sessions relating to online sexual abuse, cyber-bullying and internet safety, which was a 9% increase on the previous year.
- A third (3,716) of these counselling sessions were related to online sexual abuse, of which 41% led to referrals to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. During 2015/16 Childline carried out 844 counselling sessions with children and young people who had concerns about being exposed to sexually explicit images online.

A range of NSPCC research with young people has provided further evidence about children's experiences online:

- Research by the NSPCC and the Children's Commissioner for England with over 1,000 young people aged 11-18 from across the UK, found that over half had been exposed to online pornography, with nearly all of this group (94%) having seen it by age 14. In many cases they first encountered this material inadvertently, i.e. via a pop-up.<sup>14</sup>
- A survey of over 1,700 young people found that 50% had seen inappropriate content, including material that was sexual and/or violent,

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<sup>14</sup> Martellozzo, E., Monaghan, A., Adler, J., Davidson, J., Leyva, R., and Horvath, M., "I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it", 2016, (available at <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/october-2013/research07Oct2013.pdf>) .

or involved bullying and self-harm, on the most popular sites for children age 13+<sup>15</sup>.

- Young people have told us that they want to be protected from harmful content online. In a survey we conducted with over 1,600 11-16 year olds, 65% felt that social media sites needed to do more to protect them from adult content, 67% from self-harm content, and 60% from violent content<sup>16</sup>.

#### **4.3 Proposed scope for an Inquiry into the harm and abuse facing Welsh children online**

**The NSPCC, through its Childline service, frontline service delivery and research, is able to offer a unique insight into young peoples' experiences online.** From the contacts we receive from young people and the range of recent research we have published, it is evident that too many children are being exposed to dangerous and harmful content online, or being subjected to online harassment, grooming and sexual exploitation.

We believe a committee inquiry asking 'How safe are Welsh Children online?' with a remit to gather evidence on the harm and abuse facing Welsh children online would be extremely timely. We believe this inquiry could cover the following core elements:

- **Establish the scale of the problem in Wales**

There is a lack of national baseline data on the range of online safety issues, which means that an inquiry gathering evidence from young people, teachers, professionals, industry experts etc. would be a useful way to establish the scale and nature of the risks facing children and young people in Wales.

- **Work towards a shared understanding of online abuse**

**There is a lack of consistent and universal terminology for what constitutes online abuse specifically relating to children and young people.** Inconsistent use of language can lead to inconsistent understanding of laws, policies and practices on the same issue. It is imperative that we develop a common understanding of online abuse so that we can develop robust and consistent evidence on the nature and scale of children and young people affected and impacted by online abuse.

Online abuse can take many forms, including sexual exploitation that is carried out while the victim is online, grooming for sexual purposes, distribution of or knowingly obtaining access to child sexual abuse material, sexual extortion, solicitation, online sexual enticement, sexual communications, and causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity.

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<sup>15</sup> NSPCC, 'Net Aware', (2016).

<sup>16</sup> NSPCC, 'Net Aware'.

The distinguishing factor is that the abuse has a link to the online environment. Definitions of online abuse need to incorporate abuse that takes place through social media or other online channels; abuse that is repeated by sharing it online; abuse that is orchestrated, planned and organised via online channels; abuse that is recorded and uploaded online (for personal use or for distribution/sharing with others); and abuse where the internet is used as a means to exploit.

- **Strategic Leadership and Prioritisation**

**Concrete, cross-party political leadership at every level of Government and in every UK administration is required.**

We have been calling for **the Welsh Government to make issues of a child's right to online safety a priority across a range of governmental departments to ensure a joined-up approach to keeping Wales' children safer online.** To do this, we are recommending that they establish a cross-cutting Online Safety Action plan and an e-safety expert advisory group or forum made up of Welsh Government officials from Safeguarding, Education, Skills, Community Safety (incl. Police) and Communities as well as experts, stakeholders and industry representatives.

We welcome innovative steps already taken to develop an e-safety zone on the Welsh Government Hwb website and the roll out of lesson plans and training for teachers. NSPCC Cymru/Wales is however calling on Welsh Government to develop a cross-cutting and comprehensive action plan for online safety supported by an expert digital advisory group. Such an advisory group, operating at devolved level (and mirroring similar bodies already in existence in Scotland and Northern Ireland) would ensure Welsh Government officials and Ministers are kept informed of the latest issues, research and developments about the online risks to children. A National Action plan could help join up key Governmental departments, work to improve education, awareness and training on these issues, work with parents to help them deal with the problem and make sure Wales is able to play a key part in dialogue with social media providers about the issues facing our children.

**Technology and communications service providers are not providing enough leadership.** They need to recognise that their networks and platforms are the key enablers of online child sexual abuse. We believe Welsh Government needs to be at the heart of these conversations to represent the interests of Welsh children.

- **The role of schools**

We all have a responsibility to ensure that children are safe. School forms a fundamental part of children's lives and this means school staff and communities have an especially important role in helping to promote online safety and to protect children from the risks online as well as often being in

a position where they need to help deal with issues when things go wrong online.

**NSPCC Cymru Wales has been calling for improved measures to empower children to protect themselves and prevent abuse and we believe this should be done through compulsory age-appropriate PSE/SRE with a clear focus on keeping safe online. This also should be co-developed with young people to capture the reality of their online lives.** Building on excellent work the Welsh Government has already done around starting to ensure better focus on e-safety in education, we would like to see mandatory delivery all primary and secondary school pupils under the proposed new Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience as part of the new Curriculum for Wales.

- **Online Safety and Safeguarding**

**We believe it would be beneficial for the committee to gather evidence about how far existing policies and the development of new children's safeguarding policies and procedures address the issue of online harm and abuse.** We have been calling for Welsh Government to work with the new Wales National Safeguarding Board so that children's online safety is a core priority as its new Strategy is developed. This would also be timely as the refreshed Safeguarding Children Working Together Guidance is developed which will also lead to changes to the All Wales Child Protection Procedures. We also believe each local Safeguarding Children Board should develop an online safety strategic plan to support a strong response to these new and emerging challenges in child protection. It would be useful for the Committee Inquiry to explore how prominent online safety is in current safeguarding practices.

- **Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act 2016**

Following an NSPCC campaign, which received support from over 50,000 people, Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 was passed into law, making it illegal for an adult to send a sexual communication to a child. However, whilst this law was passed by Parliament over a year ago and adopted in Wales through an LCM it is still yet to receive a commencement order, leaving children at significant risk of being targeted by sexual offenders. Despite multiple attempts to contact the Ministry of Justice, we have been unable to receive an answer as to why Section 67 has still not been implemented.

NSPCC figures have demonstrated the scale of sexual abuse and the urgent need for this legislation to be enacted. In 2015 there was a one-third increase in the number of cases of child sexual abuse compared to the previous year, with one known method used by paedophiles being sexual communication online. At the same time, the number of contacts to ChildLine from children and young people about online grooming increased



by 10% to 3,150. Section 67 is an essential step to help protect children online and counteract the worrying rise in sexual abuse cases.

**If it is helpful for the Committee, we will be able to arrange visits to Childline or for members to meet with a group of young people to support this inquiry.**

# Appendix – Overview of issues affecting children online

## Online child sexual abuse

### Online child sexual abuse material

The production, consumption and circulation of online child abuse material is an abhorrent and dangerous crime. Any misconception that the distribution and possession of child abuse images impacts less on victims than contact abuse is unequivocally wrong: behind every indecent image of a child or young person online a child has been harmed or abused in the real world. **The victim is condemned to repeated re-victimisation, violation and degradation each time the image is accessed.** The knowledge that their image can be repeatedly viewed and may never be removed contributes to the on-going trauma that victims face, with CEOP estimating that there were as many 50,000 individuals in the UK involved in downloading and sharing indecent images of children 2012, though emerging findings from the NSPCC suggests that the scale of this type of offending is far greater than previously thought.

### Online child sexual exploitation

In 2014/15 the NSPCC's ChildLine service performed almost 400 counselling sessions with children about online grooming, an increase of 42% on the previous year.<sup>17</sup> Further to this, the NSPCC made a Freedom of Information request to police forces across England and Wales, and found that **the internet is used in eight cases of child sexual abuse every day**, including rape, online grooming, and live-streaming of sexual abuse. In 2014/15 the number of police-recorded offences for obscene publications rose by 62% in Northern Ireland, 69% in England, and 114% in Wales.<sup>18</sup>

### Online non-sexual child abuse

Inexcusable and disturbing videos of non-sexual child abuse continue to be uploaded to social networking sites, and often remain there. Not only are we extremely concerned for the welfare of those specific children who are suffering abuse, we are also concerned about the millions of children who are exposed to this content.

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<sup>17</sup> ChildLine statistic, 2016, NSPCC

<sup>18</sup> How Safe Are Our Children, 2016, NSPCC

## Online harassment, hatred and bullying

Our evidence from ChildLine shows that cyber-bullying counselling sessions have seen an 88% increase in the last 5 years (2011/12 to 2015/16), and is one of the most counselled online issues.

- During 2015-16, ChildLine provided 4,541 counselling sessions about cyber-bullying; this is the highest it has ever been and represented a 13% increase on 2014-2015.
- 33% of young people reported seeing bullying/hatred on the social networking sites they used most frequently, as part of our Net Aware research, which aligns with Child Net research which highlighted that 86% of young people (aged 13-17 years old) felt that the internet made it easier for people to be mean, and 82% of respondents had seen or heard something hateful online.

Young people have expressed to ChildLine the impact that bullying behaviour and hate content has on them; reducing young people's self-esteem, impairing their ability to establish relationships, and in extreme cases - leading to mental health problems, including self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

## Children's exposure to harmful content

While we welcome the efforts which have been made over the last few years to reduce the amount of freely available and intrusive pornography that can be found on online, many children and young people are still able to access explicit content. This was highlighted in a recent report the NSPCC published with the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England which identified **that almost all (94%) of the sample of young people (from across the UK) whose views were sought for the research had been exposed to online pornography by age 14.**<sup>19</sup>

Our Net Aware consultations with over 1,700 children reported that of those sites which had terms and conditions rating them as suitable for age 13+, 50% of children reported seeing inappropriate content, with 33% seeing bullying, 29% violence and hatred, 24% sexual content, and 13% self-harm material. Across the 'top 50' sites reviewed - i.e. the most popular social media platforms - 46% of children reported seeing racism, adult content, bullying, and self-harm material.<sup>20</sup>

## Impact on children and young people

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<sup>19</sup> Martellozzo et al, 2016, I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it, NSPCC, Office of the Children's Commissioner

<sup>20</sup> Net Aware, 2016, NSPCC

At the NSPCC and ChildLine, we are constantly hearing from children about the negative impact that viewing inappropriate content has had on them; content that they felt incited them to self-harm; to compete to lose weight; that allowed them to access violent and degrading portrayals of sex. **Children often talk to us about the lack of boundaries that exist on the internet; leaving them feeling exposed to images that they did not want to see, or feel ready to see.** This content ranges from sexualised images right through to coverage on the news. The advent of social networking has also raised concerns over the range and type of content that children can easily access online. In our Net Aware research parents would stumble across content inappropriate for an 11 year old within 20 minutes of accessing 88% of social networking platforms.

As such, children typically first come across online pornography by accident when it appears as a pop-up while they are searching for other content. **Viewing pornographic content can destabilise a young person's understanding of what a healthy relationship constitutes,** with many young people believing that the pornography they view is an accurate representation of sex, with just over half of boys and four in ten girls believing what they had viewed to be realistic. 44% of boys and 29% of girls also reported that online pornography had given them ideas about the types of sex they wanted to try out.<sup>21</sup>

Wider academic research<sup>22</sup> shows that there is considerable variation in the extent to which young people report being upset or traumatised by online encounters, and its duration. Online and offline vulnerabilities are often cited as being interrelated, creating a 'double jeopardy' effect<sup>23</sup>, whereby **children who are more vulnerable offline also tend to be less resilient online.** Of concern for the NSPCC is the permeation of violent and harmful imagery in every aspect of children and young people's lives, and the impact this has on the developing minds of young people and their mental health. **Children and young people need help in contextualising what they see online, and need help in building resilience and ways to cope with disturbing content.**

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<sup>21</sup> Martellozzo et al, 2016, I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it, NSPCC, Office of the Children's Commissioner

<sup>22</sup> EU Kids Network

<sup>23</sup> D'Haenens, 2013, How to cope and build online resilience, EU Kids Network

## Wider debate on online abuse

**It is important not to lose sight of children within the wider debate on online abuse and ensure that improved protections for everyone also work for children.** Nonetheless it is also important to recognise that aspects of the wider debate do crossover and many of the issues we raise in this briefing are interconnected. This is particularly highlighted in evidence such as our pornography research which demonstrated a clear delineation across gender on the question of whether online pornography represented realistic sex, and the difference in attitudes between boys and girls in wanting to try out sex seen in online pornography. It raises questions about gender attitudes and sexuality and is worthy of urgent consideration within the wider debate about how online abuse harassment reflects or reinforces negative societal attitudes.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Martellozzo et al, 2016, I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it, NSPCC, Office of the Children's Commissioner