

Speech: Children and Families Minister speaks at safeguarding conference

Since becoming Minister for Children and Families, it's been a real pleasure and a great privilege to meet with and speak to people like you who are committed to safeguarding and transforming the lives of our most vulnerable children and young people to ensure they remain safe, healthy, and reach their full potential.

I want to continue to get out across the country to hear from those who work on the frontline about how my department can support all schools and colleges, and the wider child protection system, to keep our children safe.

Today I am here to talk about peer on peer abuse.

We all know the devastating impact that peer on peer abuse can have on children. Victims are likely to be traumatised and distressed. In some cases, the impact can be life changing.

We know that for parents and carers, to find that their child has been a victim, can be particularly difficult.

It is so important that everyone is doing all they can to prevent peer on peer abuse from taking place in the first place and when it does happen that victims are provided with appropriate support.

I want to take the opportunity to update you on the steps my department is taking to support you in doing all we can to keep our children safe and in particular discuss support related to peer on peer abuse.

Creating an appropriate atmosphere of tolerance and respect can go a long way to creating a safe environment for pupils and students and my department has been working hard to support schools and colleges to develop a whole school or college approach to combat bullying, harassment and abuse of any kind.

I firstly want to touch on the wider child protection system and our work to support the move from Local Children's Safeguarding Boards to new multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

Following a public consultation at the end of last year and our government response in February, my department published its revised Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance in June. Over 700 organisations and individuals responded to the consultation and we are grateful for the care, attention and detail that people gave in their responses.

Working Together sets out the local context of how the three safeguarding partners the local authority, a clinical commissioning group for an area within the local authority, and the chief police officer in the local authority area will make arrangements to work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of local children.

Details of new local arrangements must be published by the three safeguarding partners no later than 29 June 2019, and be in place no later than 29 September 2019.

I encourage everyone to engage with your local partners and your local arrangements.

These new arrangements present a real opportunity for local partners to consider the local context of peer on peer abuse, put in place targeted measures to prevent abuse, and make sure systems are in place to respond quickly to ensure victims are protected and supported.

What about the funding we are investing to prevent abuse, including peer on peer abuse and support victims? The NSPCC is doing a great job. My department is supporting the NSPCC through an £8 million grant contribution over four years to 2020, towards funding Childline and the NSPCC's National Helpline. In 2016/17, the NSPCC Childline provided over 3,000 counselling sessions to children and young people concerned about being sexually assaulted by their peers.

The Government Equalities Office funded the UK Safer Internet Centre to develop cyber-bullying guidance, and an online safety toolkit to help schools deliver sessions about cyberbullying, peer pressure and sexting.

In each of the last three years, this government has provided £7 million pounds of funding for non-statutory organisations supporting victims and survivors of sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse. Examples include:

- £1.7 million for Ministry of Justice funded female rape support centres for the provision of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation support;
- £4.7 million provided directly to Police and Crime Commissioners to support organisations working with Child Sexual Abuse victims and survivors locally, and
- over half a million to organisations working with victims and survivors of sexual abuse nationally. This includes funding to the National Association of People Abused in Childhood, the NSPCC and Safeline Warwick.

On 22nd August, the government announced the 11 successful local authority-led projects that will receive £13 million pounds from the Trusted Relationships Fund. The fund will trial new and existing approaches and interventions that strengthen relationships between vulnerable children aged from 10-17 and the adults who support them.

These awards demonstrate the government's commitment to early intervention and supporting children at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation and peer on peer abuse. They help provide vital services, including:

- telephone and online counselling for victims of child sexual abuse
- increased support for adult survivors, and
- therapeutic services for children and young people with learning disabilities who have been sexually abused.

I am delighted that my government is providing funding for such essential and valuable work.

I now want to consider peer on peer abuse in schools and colleges.

All children, from whatever their background, no matter what challenges they face, deserve a safe environment in which they can learn. Nothing is more important than safeguarding children and promoting their welfare.

Schools and colleges are a particularly important part of the wider child protection system given that they are in a position to identify concerns early, provide help for children and prevent concerns from escalating.

We recognise the seriousness of peer on peer abuse and know that it can remain under-recognised by professionals working with children and under-reported by children themselves.

My department has been developing evidence on the scale of the problem by including questions on the prevalence of bullying, including sexual bullying and harassment in our omnibus survey of schools and will use these findings to inform future policymaking.

I want to spend some time considering a particular form of peer on peer abuse- sexual violence and sexual harassment.

The evidence speaks for itself and it is clear why we all must do more.

- Girlguiding's Girls' Attitudes Survey 2017 found 64% of girls aged 13-21 had experienced some form of sexual violence or sexual harassment at school or college in the past year.
- The National Education Union and UK Feminista "its just everywhere report" found over a third of female pupils and 6% of male pupils at mixed-sex schools have personally experienced some form of sexual harassment at school.

We know that child on child sexual violence and sexual harassment are complex problems for schools and colleges to consider and manage. They can exist on a continuum; take place online or offline, inside and outside of school and college, and they are never acceptable.

It is important that all victims in all schools and colleges are taken seriously and offered timely and appropriate support.

In December last year, my department published advice on sexual violence and

sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges. The advice sets out:

- what sexual violence and sexual harassment look like
- schools' and colleges' legal responsibilities
- the importance of preventative education, and
- how to manage reports of abuse and support victims.

I know there are many organisations represented in this room today that played an important role supporting my officials drafting this advice.

To name just a few, and I apologise in advance to anyone in the room that I have missed- thanks to Carlene Firmin from the University of Bedfordshire, Farrer and Co, The National Police Chiefs Council, Barnardos, Childnet, Girlguiding and the NSPCC for their help in putting this advice together.

We know through the feedback received from the sector, during the recent Keeping Children Safe in Education consultation that this advice is helping schools and colleges understand the complexities of this issue and the options open to them to manage reports of abuse and support victims.

Your views played a vital part in helping us to strengthen the advice. Revised advice was published in May.

Given its positive reception, we embedded key parts of the advice within part 5 of our revised and strengthened Keeping Children Safe in Education [statutory guidance](#) that commenced on the 3rd of September. This gives child on child sexual violence and sexual harassment the prominence it deserves in statutory guidance.

I want to reiterate a key message from the advice and the statutory guidance.

It is so important that sexual violence and sexual harassment is never tolerated or dismissed as "banter", "part of growing up", "just having a laugh" or "boys being boys".

I encourage heads, principals and designated safeguarding leads in particular, if they have not already done so, to read the detailed advice and the revised statutory guidance.

I'm also pleased to confirm that we are setting up an online safety working group of sector experts that will help us consider how we reflect online safety in our safeguarding guidance and advice in the future. A key strand of our thinking will be around online peer on peer abuse. The group is due to meet for the first time later this month.

Whilst departmental guidance has its place in supporting schools and colleges, I am particularly excited about other measures that I hope, in time, will help reduce instances of peer on peer abuse in the first place.

Many of you will be aware, and I am sure the vast majority of you will welcome the fact we are making Relationships Education compulsory in all primary schools, Relationships, and Sex Education compulsory in all secondary

schools, and are making Health Education compulsory in all state funded schools.

A thorough engagement process informed this decision. Our call for evidence received over 23,000 responses, including many responses from schools, parents and young people. Thank you to those of you here today that supported that process by sharing your expertise.

My department engaged with 90 organisations representing a broad range of views, including teaching unions, faith representatives, the NSPCC, Barnardos, Girl guiding, the Children's Commissioner and the Independent Schools Council.

This engagement was led by Ian Bauckham CBE, an executive head teacher and CEO of a multi academy trust to ensure we focussed on what works best in schools to support young people.

All schools will be encouraged and supported to start teaching the subjects from September 2019. Many are already teaching the subjects effectively and will be able to adopt the new guidance quickly. We also felt it was necessary to give schools time to prepare for the change and ensure they provide high quality provision. As such, the requirement to teach the new subjects will follow from September 2020.

Through Relationships Education, and Relationship and Sex Education, we want young people to learn what positive, healthy and respectful relationships look like, including respectful peer-to-peer relationships, about consent and boundaries, and being safe in various situations, including online. This is also about knowing how and when to ask for help.

We launched a consultation on the draft regulations and statutory guidance on 19 July. Please do use this opportunity to feedback your views into the consultation before it closes on 7 November 2018 so we can ensure these subjects support all young people in their transition to adult life.

Moving beyond my department and government, I want to touch on the role that everyone has to play in protecting children.

My department and I have child protection at the heart of all of our work but reducing the risk of peer on peer abuse and providing appropriate support for victims is only possible with the help and commitment of individuals and organisations like yourselves.

That is why I'm encouraged to see Farrer producing a peer on peer abuse tool kit, which I know Adele will be speaking about later this morning. I'm also impressed and extremely interested in Carlene's work with regard to contextual safeguarding. I know Carlene has worked closely with officials across my department, but especially with those from my child protection and safeguarding in schools teams. I am pleased to see threats that children and young people face from outside the home and their wider context reflected in the recent updates to our statutory guidance.

I am delighted to see innovative programmes like Childnet's DeShame project;

working with safeguarding experts from Denmark and Hungary to improve the understanding of online sexual harassment among teenagers and promote cross-border cooperation and mutual learning- just amazing! I am pleased my officials played a small part in supporting the project. Its work with young people to raise awareness of the issue and encourage them to report online sexual harassment via a youth-created campaign has been particularly effective.

Girlguiding's girls annual attitude survey provides invaluable insight into how girls and young women feel about their everyday lives. I would like to thank you for sharing this research with us and for the girl-led social action campaigns you provide as a platform for girls to talk directly to people in power.

As I said at the beginning, peer on peer abusive can be devastating, for victims, parents and all the children involved. Preventing abuse and supporting victims is one of my department's top priorities and it is great to see so much good work from others in this space. Thank you.

I want to thank Farrer and Co for arranging this conference, inviting me, and providing the opportunity to speak to you about this important issue today.

My officials are always keen to speak to heads, designated safeguarding leads, child safeguarding experts, and indeed anyone who has an interest in this space on what more we in government can do. Please do get in touch with them if you want to be involved.

I truly believe that together we can go even further in creating a positive, secure and safe environment for all children across all stages of their development.