

## **SYP findings from ‘Protection from Sexual Offending’ consultation with the Scottish Government**

**November 2018**



For:

- Expert Group on Preventing Sexual Offending Involving Children and Young People
- Scottish Child Law Centre Conference on 22nd November "Children and Young People in the Digital Age - Protected, Respected and Supported? - Ensuring that law, policy and practice in Scotland is fit for purpose."

### **Our approach**

We were delighted to team up with the Scottish Government’s Child Protection team to co-produce a Consultation Workshop on ‘Protection from Sexual Offending’ at our 67<sup>th</sup> National Sitting on 21<sup>st</sup> October in Kilmarnock. Research published in September 2017 highlighted that offences falling within the ‘other sexual crimes’ category are often committed online. Where these crimes are committed online, it is much more likely that the age of people involved are younger. In 2016-17, 75% of people harmed by these offences were under 16, with an average age of 14.

In response, we asked young people what action is needed, and to help identify and develop solutions that keep children and young people safe from sexual offending in general, and particularly from where it takes place online. I’d also like to relay the response to our co-designed questions in our #WhatsYourTake online survey which was open from 21<sup>st</sup> September until 29<sup>th</sup> October, gathering 546 responses from young people aged 12-25 across Scotland, from all 32 local authorities and 10 of our national voluntary organisations.

We would be grateful if the Expert Group could take account of these views, and of course, would be delighted to discuss them further. Some of our findings were quite troubling, so if anyone needs to go outside and take a breather during my presentation, please feel free to do so - I won’t mind.

### **Our findings**

#### **How safe do you feel online?**

Our most stark result from this consultation is that, when asked to identify how safe they feel online on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is the least safe and 10 is the most safe, the average choice was 7.07 - and all 546 young people answered this question.

Reasons why varied from: having online friends and therefore feeling socially safe online, the ease of reporting concerning online behaviour, having had good cyber-safety education in school or parental help with online security. Some felt that their safety online was dependant on their behaviour or their knowledge or vigilance of the potential dangers - for example:

- *'Nothing can hurt me if I don't do anything stupid.'*
- *'I patch strangers instead of answering.'*
- *'I currently feel safe but I am aware of the dangers and cyber bullying.'*
- *'I always have the thought running through the back of my mind of what could happen.'*

However, some respondents still identified that they feel less safe when it comes to cyber-security, scam emails, data-sharing, viruses and online banking.

Many offered tips based on what they already do which makes them feel safe online, such as rejecting adds from strangers, keeping accounts private, having complex passwords, installing VPNs and disabling your public location services. One person admitted the dangers are a barrier to their free participation online:

*'Personally I feel that I spectate a lot on social media platforms rather than actually posting opinions that could be criticized or targeted.'*

Many young people reported that they feel they can be 'found easily, for example, the disclosure of private information such as your home address or your location. There were also some really troubling revelations related to cat fishing, pedophilia, hacking, the sending of inappropriate images and revenge porn -as well as the enhanced vulnerability of young women and girls. For example, I'd like to read out the following anonymous quotes:

- *'It's a scary thing sitting in front of a screen and having the thought at the back of your mind that the 13 year old friend you might be talking to might actually be 40 and trying to hunt you down.'*
- *'Old men talk to me.'*
- *'It's so easy for creepy people to contact young people.'*
- *'It's easier to lie online.'*
- *'I've received threatening messages in the past of a sexual nature from people who I don't even know.'*
- *'I still feel like anyone could easily hack into your accounts.'*
- *'Your webcam can also be hacked which I have actually experienced. I now have a sticker over my webcam as I am paranoid. Cyber bullies are also everywhere, especially Facebook and YouTube.'*
- *'I was bullied online in the past so I don't feel completely safe.'*
- *'I feel that as a male I am less vulnerable to harassment and assault.'*

### **Do you feel that young people understand the risks around online and offline sexual behaviour?**

When asked if they felt that young people understand the risks around online and offline sexual behaviour, the response was mixed, although ultimately more young people answered 'no' - they don't understand the risks. However, there was only around 2% of a difference in those who answered 'No' compared with 'Yes' - and almost 18% answered 'I don't know' to this question.

Some explanations included that, despite many being taught about and knowing the risks and dangers of online sexual behaviour in school, (with some good examples given such as 'a week

focusing on internet safety', information 'by the NHS and school staff', posters, word-of-mouth, the news, or 'Sexual Health Drop-in's and 'free contraception' at schools);

... 'young people still take risks on a frequent basis', 'cast them aside', or are 'more careless but more trustful'. Someone suggested that 'hormones take over', yet another responded, *'I think too many people think that it won't happen to them... I have been a victim of revenge porn and it is a helpless situation to be in.'* Perceived anonymity was also mentioned as an explanation for not understanding the risks.

However many more young people reported that it is not covered enough, or at all, in school, calling for more education around this topic in subjects like PSHE.

Others pointed out gaps in current knowledge/education, including:

- Multiplayers gaming.
- Streaming.
- The consequences teenage online sexual behaviour can have in your adult life - for example: *'From personal experience as a young girl I was coerced into online sexual behaviour that I did not consider the consequences to. With hindsight, if I had been made aware of what could happen and the impact it would have on my life I would have acted differently.'*
- Sexual assault.
- The seriousness of the comments that can be made.
- More realistic videos about internet safety.
- Laws around online sexual crimes.

As well as a reluctance on the part of some teachers to tackle the subject with confidence:

*'Teachers seem to find stuff like this "uncomfortable" to talk about but these are the important things. not even my guidance counsellor will talk about this stuff in class.'*

Many called out adults' inappropriate interactions with young people online:

*'Online I find that young people get treated as adults and will end up acting as such and will feel too comfortable exploring inappropriate sexual behaviour with strangers.'*

As well as certain new online features which enhance young people's vulnerability, such as 'snapmaps':

*'I feel that snapmaps in particular leaves many people vulnerable to attack and harassment. Many young people have that enabled which allows anyone on their friends list to see their location in full time.'*

A point I thought was well-made which summed all this up and leads well into the next part of my presentation was:

*'Technology is advancing faster than our education system, so any education around online safety etc is reactive after an incident rather than proactive'*.

## Workshop 'Factory' activity

At our workshop, we got stuck in to a factory activity where we had four tables, each focusing on coming up with either, risks associated with children and young people being online, consequences, ideas for risk reduction and a sorting table assessing these according to high or low risk. You had to be there!

Ultimately, our aim was to come up with recommended actions based on the risk reduction ideas under the headings of What? and Who? - with What? being the action we think should be taken and Who? being the recommended organisation, person or place to take forward the action.

I don't have time to highlight the risks and consequences we identified, but our recommended actions to reduce these were as follows:

### What?

- Engaging lessons on the dangers of online sexual offending which cover the consequences and laws surrounding it.
- A mental health workshop relating to ways young people can stay calm and think before they type/send messages/photos/videos online.
- Ensure any education is youth-friendly, blame-free but to the point, positive and 'non-cringe'.
- Ask for notifications to check you're OK with sending what you're about to send.
- Launch a 'think before you send/type' campaign, which suggests a '2 hour wait-time' if you are unsure about replying to a message online', and reinforcing that 'it is okay to say no or refuse' to do something you're being asked to do.

### Who?

- Schools, colleges and universities.
- Student/pupil councils.
- Teachers.
- Parents/carers.
- Yourself.
- SYP.
- Local authorities' Support Workers doing school visits.
- Speakers from external organisations doing schools visits e.g. 'Landed' was recommended, see more [here](#).
- Youth Groups.
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.
- All social media platforms.
- Online influencers.

## Conclusion

To sum up, I think it's clear that we still have lots of work to do to prevent sexual offending online and ensure our children and young people feel safe and protected online. Experiences of feeling safe online and aware of the dangers is patchy across Scotland. Capacity-building and

good practice sharing is needed, as well as investment into prevention through education and capacity-building of young people and teachers.

SYP has been calling for years for empowering, youth-led and rights-based sex and relationships education to be an integral part of PSHE - and we believe that should incorporate the topic of online sexual offending too. The impact of being abused online is too great for further delay on this. We need to see boldness from our decision-makers in tackling this issue, to empower more young people to be confident in combatting it themselves. Let's not shy away from this issue, let's be more bold and let's take preventive action without delay to safeguard our young people in Scotland, to make this country the best place to grow up in - offline *and* online too.