

Women and Equalities Committee

**Attitudes towards women and girls in
educational settings: Government, Ofsted
and Office for Students responses to the
Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2022–23**

First Special Report of Session 2023–24

HC 258



Women and Equalities Committee

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Publication

This report, together with formal minutes relating to the report, was Ordered by the House of Commons, on 15 November 2023, to be printed. It was published on 17 November 2023 by authority of the House of Commons.

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First Special Report

The Committee published its Fifth Report of Session 2022–23, Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings (HC 331) on 5 July. The responses from the Government (received on 23 October), Ofsted (received on 6 November) and the Office for Students (received on 6 November) are appended below.

Government Response

Following the death of Sarah Everard and the thousands of testimonies about sexual harassment and abuse that followed as part of the Everyone's Invited campaign, the Department for Education commissioned Ofsted to undertake a review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges in England. The review was published on 10 June 2021.

The Department for Education has led a programme of actions including:

- ▶ Publication of strengthened Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance and revised standalone guidance on Child-on-Child Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment;
- ▶ Asked schools to dedicate time on INSET days supported by the compulsory Relationships, Sex and Health Education curriculum;
- ▶ Asked the Children's Commissioner for recommendations as to how to reduce children's access to pornography and harmful content, and worked with her to publish a guide for parents to talk to children about online sexual harassment;
- ▶ Held national events with local safeguarding partners – health, police and local authorities – to identify barriers and good practice in multi-agency working;
- ▶ Developed webinars to support teaching of the Relationships, Sex and Health Education curriculum;

- ▶ Progressed a new pledge to end the use of non-disclosure agreement within universities in sexual harassment cases;
- ▶ Worked with the Home Office on the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy;
- ▶ Worked with Parliament to progress the Online Safety Bill;
- ▶ Worked with the Ministry of Justice on the victim support agenda;
- ▶ Worked with the National Crime Agency on their response to abuse and exploitation; and
- ▶ Worked with the Cabinet Office on the ‘Stop Abuse Together’ campaign.

Responses to specific recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Government must take steps to ensure that all schools, including both mainstream and special schools, recognise the seriousness of the problem of sexual harassment in education settings of female students and staff and have the funding they require to deliver safeguarding effectively.

Recommendation 3: The Government has updated the statutory Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance to include tackling peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence. This is a positive step to ensure that schools better protect children and young people from harmful sexual behaviour. However, schools need the appropriate time and money to implement the guidance properly and provide effective safeguarding training.

1. The updates to *Keeping Children Safe in Education* made it explicit that all schools should understand that sexual harassment and sexual violence might happen in any school, and that they should prepare and act accordingly. The statutory guidance sets clear expectations about safeguarding training. It is for schools to decide how best to meet these strengthened duties and funding is available through core schools funding. The Government has significantly increased funding for education. The total schools’ budget will be over £59.6 billion in 2024–25 – the highest ever level in real terms, as measured by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS).

Recommendation 2 is for Ofsted to respond.

Recommendation 4: The Government should undertake an evaluation of how well schools are following the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance and the impact that guidance is having in practice. The evaluation should include scrutiny of any barriers preventing schools

from implementing the guidance effectively. This evaluation should be completed within the next six months.

2. *Keeping Children Safe in Education* is updated annually, including testing with stakeholders. There is a consultation on substantive changes. The next consultation of the guidance will be launched later this year.

Recommendation 5: Government guidance should make clear the harmful effect such technology can have and the Department for Education and Ofsted should improve their monitoring of its impact in educational settings and the effectiveness of school leaders in tackling this corrosive problem.

3. *Keeping Children Safe in Education* provides schools and colleges with information about what they should do to protect pupils and students online, including on different types of abuse and harm.
4. The updated *Behaviour in schools* guidance recognises the significant effect online activity amongst pupils can have, including making school feel an unsafe place. Online incidents including soliciting or sharing of nude or semi-nude images and videos and sexual harassment should be addressed in accordance with the same principles as offline behaviour.
5. The Department is producing guidance to support head teachers to ban the use of mobile phones in schools.
6. The Online Safety Bill has now completed its passage through Parliament and will support action taken by schools to keep pupils and students safe. All companies in scope will need to proactively remove and prevent users from being exposed to illegal content. There are additional safety requirements for services used by children. Ofcom will have enforcement powers to use against companies that fail to act.

Recommendation 6: We recommend that compulsory RSHE is extended to young people in post-16 settings.

7. The Department is considering this recommendation.

Recommendation 7: The Government's review of RSHE must be evidenced. The review team should engage with children, teachers, parents and specialist VAWG organisations to ensure that any developments in policy support effectively the Government's commitment to tackling sexual harassment and violence in schools and colleges. The review should include an assessment of the reasons why some children are leaving school without having received the mandatory elements of the RSHE curriculum and whether that curriculum is meeting the needs of children.

Recommendation 8: As part of the review of relationships, sex and health education (RSHE), the Department for Education and the Government Equalities Office should work together to develop a specific strategy for engaging boys and young men in primary and secondary schools on the topics of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. The Government should lay that strategy before Parliament by the end of 2023 alongside the review. The strategy should include guidance and follow-up support the Department for Education will provide to primary and secondary school leaders to enable them to: - design and deliver an RSHE curriculum that places greater focus on boys and young men; - access learning materials covering gender norms and gender equality. As a signatory to the Istanbul Convention, the Government has an international obligation to provide such materials. The Government should work with experts in education, academia and preventing violence against women and girls to create an online repository of evidence-based materials; - provide support for students who experience all types of harmful sexual behaviour to come forward without fear of invalidation; and a safe, non-judgemental space for students who are responsible for 'low-level' behaviours to reflect on and talk about their behaviour; -train all teachers how to engage boys and young men in conversations that challenge prevailing gender norms, ideas of masculinity, and attitudes towards women and girls. The Government should also work with initial teacher training providers to include gender-sensitive training as part of their offer. All training should be evidence-based.

8. The RSHE curriculum became statutory in schools in September 2020. A review of the statutory guidance is underway. This includes input from an expert panel, and there will be a full public consultation on the revised guidance.
9. Following publication of the updated RSHE statutory guidance, the Department will update teacher training modules and assess further support needed.

Recommendation 9: Schools and teachers should have the knowledge and materials to raise awareness of what sexual harassment and sexual violence looks like, address inappropriate language and behaviour, and challenge stereotypical views of sex and masculinity. In too many cases, they lack the funding and time to deliver RSHE effectively. While it is encouraging that a significant proportion of teachers in training wish to be able to specialise in RSHE, the same concerns exist in that environment. The Government must take steps to ensure that teachers and teachers in training have the funding and time they require to learn how to deliver RSHE effectively.

10. The Department has funded a £3 million support package to support teaching of RSHE, including teacher training modules, and a ‘Train the Trainer’ programme.
11. Oak National Academy provides freely available online curriculum materials and is developing high quality, compliant RSHE resources for schools.

Recommendation 10: We welcome the Office for Students (OfS) commitment to a prevalence survey of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in the university sector. This would overcome the reluctance of some universities to do this work due to fears of reputation damage. The OfS should ensure that the survey captures students’ experiences of sexual harassment both on and off the university campus.

12. The OfS is currently conducting a pilot survey covering these issues with 13 universities. The results will inform a full survey in 2024 and will include views from students both on and off campus.

Recommendation 11: Universities need to improve their whistleblowing policies to end the culture of silence regarding sexual abuse and violence in higher education institutions.

13. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill received Royal Assent in May 2023. The Act’s provisions are due to be in force in 2024 and will include a ban on the use of non-disclosure agreements within universities in sexual harassment cases.
14. The Office for Students (OfS) requires all universities to have a complaints process. Complaints can be escalated to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator or the Office for Students. Whistleblowers should report their concerns directly to the Independent Adjudicator.

Recommendation 12: The Department for Education should develop a nationwide sexual harassment and sexual violence awareness campaign that particularly targets male university students.

15. The Home Office’s ‘ENOUGH’ campaign was launched in 2023 to raise awareness of violence against women and girls and highlighted consent and respectful relationships. The Department for Education is building on this and working with sector bodies including the Office for Students and Universities UK to collect and share good practice.

Recommendation 13: The higher education sector has made progress in tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, but that progress has been inconsistent and slow. The Office for Students (OfS) has committed to a new condition of registration which will place mandatory obligations on universities to tackle sexual harassment and sexual

violence, which we endorse. The OfS should not miss the opportunity to strengthen its requirements of universities.

Recommendation 14: The Office for Students' condition of registration should require all universities to put in place compulsory evidence-based bystander intervention programmes for all first-year students. The Office for Students should strengthen its statement of expectations to ensure that universities provide that training.

16. The Department for Education expects all universities to have policies and procedures to comply with the law, including responsibilities under the Equalities Act 2010. Many universities provide bystander training. The results of the Office for Students' public consultation will be published soon and new measures in force in 2024.

Ofsted Response

I am writing in response to the recommendations for Ofsted in your committee's recent report on attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings. As you know, I was shocked by the attitudes that our review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges revealed, and I welcome the Committee's continued focus on this issue.¹

I will address each of the recommendations in turn.

How schools address sexual harassment and abuse

Recommendation: Should Ofsted inspectors find a lack of progress has been made in tackling peer-on-peer abuse in schools, Ofsted should not delay in undertaking a further thematic review of the adequacy of safeguarding policies in schools and colleges

In 2021, we published our review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, and updated our handbooks to strengthen requirements for inspectors to assess how well schools address sexual harassment and abuse. Since then, we have routinely monitored inspection practice through a programme of themed retrieval, to assure ourselves that both inspectors and schools and colleges are implementing the changes and learning points from the review.

The evidence shows that, overall, this is the case. Findings from the retrieval also feed into our inspector training programme and help us target future retrieval topics. We will continue to monitor these issues routinely and consider further changes if we identify significant concerns.

Safeguarding continues to be an important part of our work. As part of every school inspection, we judge whether safeguarding is effective. To reach this judgement, we look at a sample of a schools' safeguarding policies, including whether they implement and review them effectively. We consider this alongside its practice and safeguarding culture. In 2022/23, 99% of schools that had a graded or ungraded inspection had effective arrangements for safeguarding.²

Abuse experienced by female staff

1 ['Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges'](#), Ofsted, June 2021.

2 ['Management information – state-funded schools – as at 30 September 2023'](#), Ofsted, October 2023.

Recommendation: As part of their inspections Ofsted should also investigate the level of abuse experienced by female staff, at the hands of pupils, parents and other staff

As set out in previous written evidence to the Committee, the focus of our inspections is primarily the education and safeguarding of pupils. Gathering evidence or information about the level of abuse experienced by female staff at the hands of pupils, parents and other staff is not a specific inspection focus.

There is a significant interval between inspections. A school judged 'outstanding' or 'good' will usually be inspected within the four academic years following its last inspection, and a school judged 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' will usually be inspected within two and a half years. Leaders and managers of schools and academy trusts, professional associations, and the police are better placed to address any serious issues as soon as they emerge and to provide appropriate support.

Nonetheless, while sexual harassment and abuse of staff are not issues that arise commonly on inspection, where they do, they become priorities for inspectors. They address the issue with school leaders immediately and consider the procedures in place to make sure appropriate action has been taken. The evidence gathered by inspectors contributes to their judgement on the school's leadership and management.

We also expect schools to have effective policies in place to deal with harmful sexual behaviour, including appropriate sanctions that are consistent with messages taught across the curriculum. Inspectors evaluate the extent to which the school has high expectations for pupils' behaviour and conduct and will expect to see these expectations applied consistently and fairly and be reflected in pupils' behaviour.

Inspectors also evaluate the extent to which relationships among pupils and staff reflect a positive and respectful culture, and that leaders, teachers, and other staff create an environment where bullying, peer-on-peer abuse or discrimination are not tolerated.

Inspectors hold face-to-face discussions with staff and pupils to gather evidence about the school's culture and practice around pupil behaviour, support for staff and other systems. Inspectors also consider the views of staff through voluntary, anonymous questionnaires, which ask whether leaders and managers are considerate of their well-being and whether all staff are treated fairly and with respect. If significant issues are raised through the staff questionnaire, they are always followed up by inspectors with the school's leadership. This includes looking at how they protect their staff from bullying and harassment, and the extent to which they have created an open and positive culture around safeguarding.

Monitoring online safety

Recommendation: Government guidance should make clear the harmful effect such technology can have and the Department for Education and Ofsted should improve their monitoring of its impact in educational settings and the effectiveness of school leaders in tackling this corrosive problem

Inspectors always consider what schools are doing to tackle harassment and abuse of women and girls, and we agree it is important to monitor the impact of technology on attitudes and behaviour towards women and girls. As set out in our handbooks, we expect schools to have a whole-school approach to addressing harmful sexual behaviour, including online sexual abuse, in line with the Department for Education's statutory guidance 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' (KCSIE). We also expect schools to have a culture that protects pupils from serious harm online, and that they have appropriate child protection arrangements in place to identify pupils at risk of harm or who have been harmed. This includes online harm and abuse by peers. If we find that this is not in place, we are likely to judge safeguarding to be ineffective, in which case the school's overall effectiveness judgement will be 'inadequate'.

Similarly, we expect schools' relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) curriculum (and wider curriculum) to address sexual harassment, online abuse and sexual violence specifically. It should also address safeguarding risks (including online risks), issues of consent, and what constitutes a healthy relationship both online and offline. We also expect schools to provide effective pastoral support.

We have recently strengthened the focus on online safety in our inspector training. We regularly update our training to reflect updates to KCSIE and are producing training on governing bodies' and schools' duties to make sure appropriate internet filtering and monitoring systems are in place on school IT systems.

Finally, I must emphasise that I do not want to give the committee false assurance about the level of assurance that inspection itself can provide. Ofsted inspection is one component of the wider accountability system for schools. Inspection is a limited review of a school's work, in which it is not possible to check compliance with every legal duty or aspect of government guidance.

However, we remain fully committed to playing our part in dealing with the issues that you raise. I hope that this letter reassures you that we will continue to examine and report on harmful attitudes to women and girls.

Amanda Spielman, His Majesty's Chief Inspector

6 November 2023

Office for Students Response

As follow up to my letter of 23 February 2023, I thought it would be helpful to provide a further update on the work of the Office for Students (OfS) to protect students from harassment and sexual misconduct.

First, I want to offer my thanks to you and your committee for raising awareness of this important issue by including it in your work programme and offering recommendations to help tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and girls in educational settings.

We welcome your committee's report and note the recommendations for the OfS in this area. These include capturing students' experiences of sexual harassment on and off university campus through a prevalence survey and requiring universities to have compulsory, evidence-based, bystander intervention programmes for all first-year students through a new condition of registration.

I am pleased to report that our pilot prevalence survey does capture experiences both on and off campus. I have set out below some further information about this and an update on our proposed new condition of registration.

Prevalence survey

In my oral evidence, I explained that data at a national level about how sexual misconduct affects students in England is currently limited and, indeed, the absence of data means it's difficult for universities to know how to target their work and whether it is successful. By addressing gaps in existing data, our pilot survey is designed to ensure that we understand how many students are affected by sexual misconduct and the context in which this is happening. Reliable data will make it easier for universities and colleges to ensure students receive the support they need.

We recently commissioned an independent poll which asked 3,000 higher education students to share information about their experiences and perceptions of sexual misconduct. Our larger scale pilot prevalence survey was launched in September 2023 and is currently asking students from 13 higher education providers about their experiences of sexual misconduct and harassment. It is the biggest survey of its kind in the UK. Details of the universities and colleges taking part can be found on our website.

In designing our survey, we have focused on the needs of students. We consulted directly with them and tested questions for suitability and comprehension. Students' feedback was clear that some of our questions were challenging but the majority said they would be happy to answer given the importance of these issues.

We expect to evaluate responses to the pilot survey in early 2024. We will look carefully at the data and draw out insights at a sector level. The pilot is also allowing us to test the process for administering a national prevalence survey in and the outcomes of the pilot will inform decisions about the approach for any future surveys. We would be happy to provide a further update to the committee after this evaluation has taken place.

Consultation on a new condition of registration

As you will know, we published a consultation on a new condition of registration earlier this year. We proposed a range of steps that higher education providers would need to take, which are set out in my letter of 23 February.

I am pleased to say that we received a significant number of responses from a range of stakeholders, including many from students and their representatives, which will inform our next steps and decision-making process. We expect to publish an analysis of consultation responses, as well as our decisions about our future approach, early in 2024.

The OfS understands how important this aspect of our work is to ensure the sector we regulate can act to prevent, and respond effectively to, harassment and sexual misconduct. I am grateful for the committee's support for our efforts and would be delighted to meet with you to discuss the issues above in more detail when we have progressed our current work.

Susan Lapworth, Chief Executive

6 November 2023