



2021-036753POSoS

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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Ms Andrea Simon
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By email: andrea.simon@evaw.org.uk

6 September 2021

Thank you for your letter of 28 July, regarding the Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. I would be grateful if you could share my response with your co-signatories.

Abuse in any form is abhorrent, especially when it is abuse of the vulnerable or children. Following the testimony on the Everyone's Invited website, the government acted quickly, which we thought was vital – asking Ofsted to undertake its review of safeguarding policies in state and independent schools and colleges, as well as setting up a specific NSPCC helpline to support those who wanted to report sexual abuse or receive advice.

Your letter raises important issues, and I would like to set out how we are responding to Ofsted's review in some more detail. We expect all schools and colleges to have robust policies in place that treat young people fairly and address concerns immediately. However, schools and colleges cannot do that alone and should not believe they have to. That is why, as well as accepting Ofsted's findings in full, we are carefully considering the recommendations for schools, government, and local safeguarding partners, and intend to go further, with much of this work already underway.

We are continuing with the NSPCC helpline, until October. We are updating guidance including Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) to ensure schools and colleagues have even clearer guidance on how to deal with reports of sexual abuse. KCSIE and our advice, 'Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges', are both clear in regard to peer on peer abuse that girls are more likely to be the victims of it, and boys more likely the perpetrators. Schools and colleges should reflect this fact in their child protection policy.

Both also set out that children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can in some cases be at a greater risk of harm, and that the stage of development of a victim and perpetrator(s) will be a relevant factor to consider when managing an allegation of abuse. Substantive updates to the guidance are always subject to public consultation and we encourage any interested organisation to engage with those consultations.

You make a particular point about KCSIE and legal obligations under the guidance. Schools and colleges are under a legal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. KCSIE sets out the framework to support schools and colleges to meet this legal obligation. Amongst other things, Part 5 of KCSIE states that “schools and colleges should not wait for the outcome (or even the start) of a police investigation before protecting the victim, alleged perpetrator(s) and other children in the school or college.”

In conjunction with strengthened guidance, we are extending our advice, support and supervision for those who lead on safeguarding in schools, with a particular focus on how they can deal more effectively with sexual abuse and harassment, including of LGBT+ students. We are committed to developing an online resource hub for designated safeguarding leads where they can access relevant advice and guidance on a range of issues. The online resources will be developed with designated safeguarding leads and sector experts and made available in 2022. We are also challenging local safeguarding partnerships, schools and government on how the wider safeguarding system works to safeguard and promote the welfare of children from sexual abuse and harassment.

Ofsted has also acknowledged that there is learning for the inspectorates and have identified areas where they will sharpen practice, including additional training for inspectors regarding peer on peer abuse. It has always been the case that where schools are failing to meet strict safeguarding standards, we will not hesitate to act. Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate will inspect any schools where there are concerns and ensure they improve practices or are closed.

We recognise that teaching children and young people about healthy relationships is critical, and we are supporting schools to teach the new compulsory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum as effectively as possible and are asking schools to dedicate time from INSET days for this. We know that pupils with SEND are more likely to be bullied, abused, and suffer poor life outcomes which is why we worked with a range of expert organisations to build the confidence and expertise of teachers to deliver the new RSHE curriculum to pupils with more complex needs.

To address the issues raised by Ofsted's review we will produce non-statutory guidance providing more detail on how and when particular curriculum content should be taught. We will also run focused webinars and training events to support teachers to deliver sensitive content effectively. We will work with expert stakeholders to develop the content of the guidance and the events will maintain a focus on those pupils with SEND. This work on the curriculum will form part of a whole school approach to tackling sexual abuse and harassment in schools. We are also working with the Children's Commissioner to immediately start looking at how we reduce children's access to pornography and other harmful content.

On whole school approaches, we are also pursuing an ambitious programme of work to do more to improve behaviour and discipline in schools. We have committed to a fundamental review and consultation of both the Behaviour and Discipline in Schools non-statutory guidance and the Suspension and Permanent Exclusion in England statutory guidance. A call for evidence including on behaviour management strategies was published in June and we have been gathering the views of children and young people as well as parents and carers forums as part of this. There will also be other opportunities for individuals or groups to provide their views when we begin a public consultation on the behaviour and discipline guidance and suspensions and permanent exclusions guidance later this year.

We are clear in all our advice to schools that whether in teaching RSHE, tackling sexual abuse and harassment, or promoting a positive whole school approach to behaviour, they need to ensure what they do is relevant to, and meets the needs of, their student body. You highlight important issues in relation to this and I have asked my officials to get in touch with you to discuss these as they continue to think about how we can best support schools and colleges.

Finally, you mention the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. We are working closely with the Home Office and other partners to ensure that we get the right messages to children and young people, to their parents and carers, as well to education professionals, in order to address the issues highlighted by Everyone's Invited and Ofsted. Listening to stakeholders is an important part of that work. We must of course also listen to the voices of children and young people, and we will continue to explore how young people can be part of changing behaviours and culture.

I was grateful to receive your kind request for a meeting. Whilst unfortunately diary pressures preclude such a meeting in the immediate future, I look forward to working with you, and as stated, officials in my department will be in contact with you.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'G' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education