



**Cornfields  
School**



**Belle Vue  
School**

# Peer on Peer Sexual Abuse Policy Review

An external and independent review of the schools' Peer on Peer  
Sexual Abuse policy and processes.



Dr Liza Thompson  
November 2021



# About the Author

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Dr Liza Thompson has worked within the field of domestic abuse and safeguarding for nearly 20 years. She holds a BA(Hons) in Law and Social Policy from the University of Kent and a PhD in Law from Queen Mary University. Her research pertains to the experiences of abused mothers within the child protection system, the findings of which feed into her continued work with victim/survivors of abuse. She lectures at universities, to policing, social work and law students.

Dr Thompson was CEO of an award winning domestic abuse charity from 2013 to 2021, and had been Chairing/Authoring Domestic Homicide Reviews and Safeguarding Adult Reviews since 2019. She is currently the Independent Chair of Rochester Diocese Safeguarding Advisory Panel and Chair of Governors at a local primary school.

She now provides consultancy and facilitation services to small organisations, specifically around policy and governance.



# Introduction

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Cornfields and Belle Vue are independent schools with the collective vision of "Improving Life Chances". The children and young people (the Learners) who attend the schools each have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) which is individual to their - often very complex - needs.

The schools are governed by a forward thinking and motivated Senior Leadership Team, and to this end, Dr Liza Thompson was commissioned to review and comment upon the schools' current Peer on Peer Sexual Abuse policy and procedures - in order to identify good practice, and possible enhancements to the current processes.

In 2017 The Department for Education (DfE) published specific guidance, on how schools should operationally manage sexual violence and sexual harassment - this was encompassed in the Keeping Children Safe in education guidance of that year and has since been updated within the current guidance ([link here](#)). In 2020 the website Everyone's Invited was launched. This site provided a space for disclosures of sexual violence and harassment. Through the disclosures, a high number of schools were identified, where inappropriate touching, sexual harassment and assaults had taken place. The veracity of peer on peer sexual abuse within schools was such that the DfE commissioned Ofsted to review the issue - and in June 2021 their report into sexual abuse in schools was published ([link here](#)).

Ofsted, and the DfEs, overarching call to schools is to *act as though sexual abuse is happening in your school*.

Peer on peer sexual abuse operates on much the same continuum as domestic abuse - there are matters of power and control, reluctance from victims to disclose, and difficulties in identifying and evidencing - and all of these matters are interlinked. However, peer on peer sexual abuse has the added complexity that the child "perpetrating" the abuse is often also a victim (of the situation or outside of the situation) and by the nature of their age, usually vulnerable.

The complexities of culpability and age are also exacerbated for the Learners at Cornfields and Belle Vue schools as their individual challenges, linked to mental health difficulties and/or learning needs, renders them particularly vulnerable to victimisation and exploitation.

It was clear to the Author from the start of this process that the language - of "Peer on Peer Sexual Abuse" - could act as a barrier to disclosure. The Author recommends that in the future, the school refer to this issue as "Harmful Sexual Behaviours", and the remainder of this report will reflect this.



# Methodology

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The Author of this review read through the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy, which was reviewed in September 2021 when a peer on peer sexual abuse overview was included. The policy describes the extensive policing background of the Senior Leadership Team, the expectation on staff to maintain professional curiosity in respect of safeguarding, the drive to upskill all staff around the signs of abuse and the fact that both school sites are extensively covered by CCTV. The 54 page Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy is comprehensive, covering all statutory requirements as well as NSPCC guidelines.

The Author also read through the schools' Peer on Peer Sexual Abuse Action Plan 2021/2022 which begins with a definition of the abuse, and includes the NSPCC (2018) description of the nature of the abuse, how it can be identified along with barriers to reporting (from The Contextual Safeguarding Network 2020), and a narrative around children's' understanding of this type of abuse. The action plan is in its infancy, having been signed off by the Board of Governors in September 2021.

The Author also had the pleasure of visiting Belle Vue school, where she was given a warm welcome and was shown around the bright and engaging class rooms. The inclusive and open culture of the school was plain to see - the Learners were encouraged to interact with the Author as a visitor to the school, and all seemed happy to be there.

Following the school visit, the Author conducted a desktop review of the policies, with a view to identifying good practice and areas of possible development in the schools' response to the issue of harmful sexual behaviours.

Following the first draft of the report, the Author met with the Headteacher to discuss the findings, and this final version of the report was prepared with the Head's feedback taken into account.



# Observations

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As introduced earlier, the dynamics of domestic abuse have some synergy with those of harmful sexual behaviours - both types of abuse involve interpersonal relationships which host uneven power dynamics, victims are made to feel culpable by the abuser and by society, and the experience of the abuse is shrouded in shame and often denial of the presence of the abuse.

Heron et al (2021) categorise the barriers for reporting, disclosing or fleeing domestic abuse as:

**Organisational** - including the appropriateness of the setting, and all the circumstances around the timing of a disclosure.

**Emotional** - including feelings of fear, shame and self blame

**Physical** - including the presence of the abuser or perpetrator, and the perpetrator's manipulation of professionals

and elements which facilitate disclosures and requests for support include:

**Positive interpersonal relationships** - which promote positive values such as autonomy and empowerment in victims

**Validation** - of their experiences

**Safety** - feeling physically and emotionally safe to disclose and ask for help

The following sections will examine how each of the barriers are addressed within the schools' policies, and how the facilitators are embedded into the schools' policies and processes. The final section will offer some ideas and suggestions to enhance the current harmful sexual behaviours provision.



# Organisational

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The ages and vulnerabilities of children and young people affected by peer on peer harmful sexual behaviours exacerbate the barriers to disclosing sexual abuse (Priebe and Goran Svedin, 2008) as does their reliance upon adults to identify the abuse, be open to disclosures and to ultimately safeguard them from harm. It was clear from the Author's visit that the Learners have strong yet appropriate interpersonal relationships with the staff at Belle Vue.

Education settings are at the heart of the multi-agency child protection system (Guest 2013) - school staff are at the forefront of identifying abuse, and additional barriers to responding to abuse can be created where staff are not fully trained, have their own experiences of abuse, fear of alienating parents or carers by raising a concern of abuse, or where schools don't believe that their school would have an issue with abuse.

The safeguarding policy is clear that safer recruitment of suitably experienced staff, is a central response to safeguarding in general, and the Peer on Peer Action Plan sets out an expectation for staff to lead the school by example. In terms of the physical environment, CCTV covers the building and areas where harmful sexual behaviours could be hidden.

*"The education settings that demonstrate best practice in safeguarding fully embrace the importance of the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children as the starting point for all policies, procedures, inductions and continuous development."*

*(Guest 2013)*

It is clear from the policies, and in discussion with the school leaders, that safeguarding is embedded into the culture of the schools - with daily briefings intended to maintain and model an appropriate culture of information sharing and proactivity towards safeguarding. The Author had sight of a comprehensive weekly reporting system which covers all aspects of safeguarding.

The atmosphere of the school was welcoming, open and calm, and appeared to be an environment where students and parents would feel safe in reporting issues.

*"We understand the importance of creating a healthy and safe environment for all children and young people, and challenge societal norms that may allow peer on peer sexual abuse to take place"*

*(Cornfields and Belle Vue Peer to Peer Sexual Abuse Action Plan 2021)*



# Emotional

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Victims of abuse, regardless of their age, are often unaware that the behaviour of the abuser is wrong. This could be because the abuser has manipulated them to believe the behaviour is normal, or the victims' fault - or because of historic experiences of abuse, which engrain the abuse as normal. (Womens Aid).

Teaching the Learners about harmful sexual behaviours and healthy relationships, can reduce both perpetration and victimisation within the school. Sharing knowledge with Learners will empower them. and validate their experiences. The Author saw a large display board dedicated to peer on peer sexual abuse, within one of the classrooms. This indicates that discussions have taken place with students.

A whole section of the Action Plan is dedicated to raising the awareness of all members of the school community in regard to safe practices, critical thinking and learning about risks outside of school.

The safeguarding policy makes it clear that the Senior Leadership Team's door is always open for Learners and staff to raise concerns.

There is a section in the Action Plan dedicated to online safety and the identification of peer on peer sexual abuse occurring online.

Consideration of a cross-school safeguarding panel, as cited in the Action Plan, is a positive step forwards as this formalises the conversations, providing a structure to raise concerns.

# Physical

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The complexities of harmful sexual behaviours within a school context are particularly problematic due to the close proximity of both parties - making it difficult for the victim to feel safe enough to report concerns.

The policing experience of the Senior Leadership Team places them in a strong position to respond to allegations in a transparent and safe way, and the Action Plan explicitly details partnership working with statutory agencies to ensure safety for those affected by harmful sexual behaviours.



# Conclusion and Recommendations

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The schools are clearly governed well by leaders with extensive experience of safeguarding adults and children. The Safeguarding Policy covers peer on peer sexual abuse in line with DfE and NSPCC guidelines, and the Peer on Peer Action Plan addresses the fundamental requirements cited by Ofsted's 2021 report. However, if the schools are keen to proactively enhance their response to peer on peer, above the expected standards, the following questions and recommendations may assist.

## 1. Policies

1.1 The creation of a specific Harmful Sexual Behaviours policy and process would be beneficial. The Safeguarding Policy is extensive, covering all of the areas required by law and good practice - a dedicated Harmful Sexual Behaviours policy would allow easier access to the specifics of this peer on peer issue.

1.2 There could be different versions of this policy for Learners, and for parents - raising their knowledge of what the school has in place to keep them safe, and therefore empowering them to raise concerns using the policy. Making the policies accessible, and visible - and relevant to the audience - breaks down the barriers of lack of awareness and fear to report.

## 2. Development of the Action Plan

2.1 The Action Plan's targets could be SMART, with a RAG system. As the Action Plan is on the schools' websites, the progress of the actions could be monitored and recorded, which would instil confidence in the school's proactivity in response to the rising concerns of harmful sexual behaviours. For example, the Action Plan could include explicit plans for training - with timescales and different levels of training linked to different roles. - this indicates the appetite to upskill and to make abuse everyone's problem.

## 3. Safety

What happens if there is a Learner who grooms, or perpetrates abuse to their peer - do they remain at the school, in close proximity to their victim? Whatever the policy would state - could it be included in the Peer on Peer Policy - so that the school community are aware of the policy.





# Conclusion and Recommendations

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## 4. Knowledge Development

4.1 Raising awareness through one to one sessions can embed the language of safeguarding, and bringing parents/carers into this learning with family related sessions could further support adults outside of the school to identify and share concerns.

4.2 Learning could also be extended to other adults attached to the school - for example taxi drivers and chaperones, who all make up the schools' communities. The author saw many adults chatting outside of the school at the end of the day - these people could be an untapped resource to share the language of safeguarding, and encourage the use of the Harmful Sexual Behaviours policy to report concerns. Having the wider school community being made aware of harmful sexual behaviours, can reduce the stigma attached - and increase reporting.

## 4. Interpersonal Relationships

4.1 Could the PEGS be trained as harmful sexual behaviours specialist advisors, as they have one to one engagement with the Learners, they would be very well placed to ask about issues and be the main point of contact for disclosures. Could the PEGS have an anonymous box in their room for worries or concerns?

## 5. Empowerment

5.1 Could the word "empower" replace the word "resilience" on the Action Plan? The word resilience has connotations of victim blaming - where the person being abused was not resilient enough, did not protect themselves and did not make the right choices.

5.2 By raising awareness of harmful sexual behaviours, the Learners are empowered, to feel able to report others, or even themselves if their behaviour causes them concerns.



# References

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