

# West Yorkshire Social Media Research and Intervention Development

Developing solutions to online  
harms among children and young  
people in West Yorkshire

March 2023



# Executive Summary

There is increasing concern across the globe about the possible impacts of social media and online experiences on young people's mental health, with fears that use of social media and online platforms may be linked to negative outcomes among young people in particular, such as mental health problems, poor sleep, violence and poor academic attainment.<sup>1</sup>

The West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) identified social media use among young people in West Yorkshire as a key area of interest, and commissioned Social Finance (SF) to conduct research into potential links with poor outcomes for young people and the potential for a school-based intervention in this space. While the relationship between social media use and individual outcomes is complex, and academic research has not yet been able to confirm or deny a direction of causality in the case of outcomes such as poor mental health, our research highlights that:

1. Young people are frequently exposed to a range of potentially harmful experiences online, with cyberbullying and harassment being the most common type of potentially harmful online experience in West Yorkshire; and
2. Many young people, professionals and parents and carers feel that these experiences directly contribute to poor psychological outcomes including anxiety, low self-esteem, self-harm and suicidality.

There are many resources and some interventions focused on online harms among children and young people, yet there is very little information globally on what works to prevent, reduce and mitigate harm. By proactively commissioning research in this space, the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit ( has positioned itself as a future leader in this field and now has a real opportunity to pilot new approaches which could be scaled nationally and beyond. This report lays out our recommendations for VRU, based on what we have learnt from young people, professionals and parents and carers directly, as well as wider academic research, on how West Yorkshire can develop a trauma-informed, co-produced intervention that will build trust and empower young people to recognise and seek support for harmful online experiences. Key recommendations include:

- Treating online harms as a Public Health concern
- Moving past the binary distinction of online and offline
- Co-producing future interventions and resources with children and young people, professionals and parents and carers
- Starting school-based interventions and education on online safety at an early age
- Focusing future interventions on harm reduction and mitigation
- Supporting young people to maximise the benefits of social media while minimising harm
- Improving peer-to-peer relationships and behaviour among young people
- Building in evaluation and learning from the beginning when rolling out any intervention
- Ensuring teachers have the training, resources and support they need to implement an intervention
- Expecting increased online harm incident rates in the short-term, as a successful intervention would likely increase support-seeking among young people before reducing rates of online harms in the longer-term

---

## Table of Contents

<b>Background and Context</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Key Findings</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Intervention Principles .....	8
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Part 1: The Level of Harm</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Theory of Change .....	12
Research Question #1: What (upsetting) content do children and young people see on social media most, and what is the impact? .....	14
Research Question #2: Are subgroups of children and young people particularly at risk of the negative impacts? .....	21
<b>Part 2: Current Support</b> .....	<b>25</b>
Research Question #3: What is being done within West Yorkshire schools and communities to support children and young people in using social media safely; what is lacking? .....	25
Research Question #4: What do children and young people, practitioners and parents/carers think about existing support? What does 'good' look like? .....	28
<b>Part 3: Intervening</b> .....	<b>31</b>
Research Question #5: What is done elsewhere; how effective is this? .....	31
Research Question #6: What are the barriers to implementing an intervention in schools in West Yorkshire; what are criteria for success? .....	36
<b>Summary and Final Recommendations</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>Appendix: Survey demographics</b> .....	<b>44</b>

---

---

# Background and Context

Many studies have found evidence for a global mental health crisis amongst today's youth, with rates of mood disorders,<sup>1</sup> self-harm, completed suicides and loneliness rising sharply among teenagers over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> This has happened alongside increased internet access and smartphone use,<sup>3</sup> and therefore there is much concern around possible links between the two trends. The size of the relationship between social media use and psychological difficulties is disputed within academic research, as is the existence of evidence for causality. However, Haidt (2022) argues that nearly all studies find a correlation, whereby the link between social media use and poor mental health becomes stronger with increased time spent on social media.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this growing concern and evidence that there is likely some link between social media use and poor mental health outcomes among young people, there are few examples of best practice in how to better protect young people online. Our [previous research](#) in West Yorkshire identified this as a key area of need; the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit commissioned Social Finance in 2021 to explore the links between social media, violence and psychological trauma among young people in West Yorkshire. At this time, our research highlighted the impact of social media on young people's mental health as the primary area of concern, finding that:

- Young people are exposed to a variety of harms on social media
- This has a significant impact on young people's psychological wellbeing; a link to violence is less often seen
- 20%-30% of young people, professionals and parents and carers thought further education, training and support would make being online safer for young people (this was the second most popular option after changes to tech platforms)
- Based on existing evidence, a schools-based intervention is likely to be most effective

Based on the findings from this research, we conducted further research for the VRU to understand in more detail what young people's experiences of being online are in West Yorkshire, what impact this has on their mental health, and what opportunities for education-based interventions may be. This report summarises the findings from this latest research and outlines key recommendations for the VRU. These recommendations will support the VRU to continue to proactively address the issue of online harms in West Yorkshire and to become a national leader in school-based approaches to reduce and mitigate harm associated with social media use among young people.

---

## Our aims for this project

Our three aims in this most recent project were to:



Refine our understanding of what young people experience online and how it affects them

---

<sup>i</sup> Mood disorders include disorders related to anxiety and depression.



Identify what support and interventions are available, and understand what does and does not work about the current support offer



Make recommendations for further support and interventions to mitigate harm related to social media use among 11–25-year-olds in West Yorkshire

---

## Research Questions

Based on findings from our previous research and on the specification from the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit, we identified six key research questions to support these aims:

- 1** What (upsetting) content do children and young people in West Yorkshire see on social media most, and what is the impact?
- 2** Are subgroups of children and young people particularly at risk of the negative impacts?
- 3** What is being done within West Yorkshire schools and communities to support children and young people in using social media safely; what is lacking?
- 4** What do children and young people, practitioners and parents/carers think about existing support? What does 'good' look like?
- 5** What is done elsewhere; how effective is this?
- 6** What are the barriers to implementing an intervention in schools in West Yorkshire; what are criteria for success?

# Key Findings

Through our research, we developed answers to each of these research questions, summarised below:

Research Question	Finding
<p><b>What (upsetting) content/contact do children and young people in West Yorkshire see and experience on social media most, and what is the impact?</b></p>	<p>Cyberbullying and harassment was the type of online harm most frequently mentioned in our focus groups with young people in West Yorkshire. In our online surveys, the type of <i>content</i> most frequently seen by young people was ‘mean comments’. The most frequently experienced type of <i>contact</i> reported in the surveys was a stranger trying to add a young person as a friend; however, when asked about what type of contact was most upsetting, survey respondents exclusively reported contact that amounted to bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment.</p> <p>Cyberbullying and harassment experiences were reported by young people, professionals and parents/carers to negatively impact young people’s mental health, seen in reduced self-esteem, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation. Young people identified cyberbullying and harassment as upsetting both when it was targeted at them and when they saw mean comments targeted at others. Other research also finds poor mental health outcomes such as these to be associated with cyberbullying and harassment experiences, and further suggests psychological impacts can be long-term.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, both our research and wider academic literature suggest cyberbullying and harassment experiences can have a negative impact on young people’s school attendance and educational attainment.</p>
<p><b>Are subgroups of children and young people particularly at risk of the negative impacts?</b></p>	<p>Respondents to our survey who indicated higher levels of anxiety and depression indicated a particularly high level of dependence on online communities; this higher dependency was also seen among girls and young women, people of mixed ethnic backgrounds, and people of minoritised sexualities. It is possible that a greater dependence on online communities could also make these groups of young people more vulnerable to potentially harmful experiences online and to the negative impacts of these.</p>
<p><b>What is being done within West Yorkshire schools and communities to support children and</b></p>	<p>Young people in West Yorkshire receive a considerable amount of education on online safety, starting for many in primary school. The majority of young people who responded to our survey had been taught about bullying/cyberbullying and the dangers of talking to strangers online, but most had not been taught about how to recognise misinformation/fake news, despite</p>

<p><b>young people in using social media safely; what is lacking?</b></p>	<p>this being one of the most common types of potentially harmful content young people said they see online. Professionals working with young people and parents/carers also receive some education and training, again with cyberbullying being the most covered topic and misinformation the least covered. Some professionals and parents and carers access online safety resources from the NSPCC, West Yorkshire Police and the Anti-Bullying Alliance, but over half of those who responded to our survey didn't remember accessing any public resources.</p>
<p><b>What do children and young people, practitioners and parents/carers think about existing support? What does 'good' look like?</b></p>	<p>Young people reported that they often find the response to online harm incidents in schools to be inadequate. They expressed a desire for online harms to be taken as seriously as offline harms by the adults around them, as well as a desire to have more control over what happens after they report an incident to a teacher. Professionals and parents/carers in West Yorkshire generally reported finding the training and education they had received as having been helpful to them, and parents/carers felt relatively confident supporting young people with online harm incidents. Some professionals expressed a desire for more training, while others thought this would not do much to help.</p>
<p><b>What is done elsewhere; how effective is this?</b></p>	<p>There are many publicly available online resources addressing a wide variety of online harm issues. There are also some expert-delivered interventions that have been developed on topics such as cyberbullying, gender-based violence and radicalisation. Beyond one cyberbullying/bullying intervention that has so far been trialled in the U.S. only<sup>ii</sup>, there is currently no formal evidence base on what works in school-based online harms interventions.</p>
<p><b>What are the barriers to implementing an intervention in schools in West Yorkshire; what are criteria for success?</b></p>	<p>Young people involved in this research expressed reluctance to seek support for online harm incidents and most did not select their teacher as someone they would go to in the case of an online harm incident. This was due to an awareness of the pressures on and limited capacity of teachers, and concerns around social pressures to keep quiet and not risk being labelled a 'snitch'. There is a perception among some professionals working outside of schools that young people would not engage with an online safety intervention if it was delivered by their teachers, and that they are more likely to take advice from someone outside of school on what to do when online harm incidents occur. There is thus a need to strengthen trusting relationships between young people</p>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://nobully.org/our-programs/>

---

	<p>and their teachers in the context of online harms in order for a schools-based intervention to be successful. It is possible that having an external organisation or staff member not directly involved in young people's day-to-day teaching lead an intervention would be beneficial. Any online harms intervention in West Yorkshire should be trauma-informed and co-developed with young people, professionals and parents/carers. In order to successfully engage and empower young people, our research indicates that an intervention should be collaborative and solutions-focused, focusing on harm reduction and mitigation more than prevention, so that young people feel empowered to use social media in a way that maximises benefits and minimises harms.</p>
--	---

---

## Intervention Principles

Based on our research, we identified key principles for any future intervention in this space:

1. The intervention should **build young people's self-esteem**, and educate young people, teachers, parents and carers on how unrealistic standards online affect self-esteem.
2. The intervention should **build trusting relationships** between young people and adults in the school system.
3. The intervention should **improve peer-to-peer relationships** and behaviours.
4. The intervention should be **collaborative and solutions-focused** and not rigid or hierarchical in its approach.
5. The intervention should encourage adults and young people to treat **online harms as just as dangerous and harmful as offline**, and enable better understanding of the overlaps between the two.
6. The intervention should address cultural change needed to encourage **greater reporting** of online harms incidents.

---

# Methodology

This was a mixed-methods project which we divided into three key stages:

- **Stage 1:** Qualitative, in-person research with young people and professionals working with young people
- **Stage 2:** Online anonymous surveys with young people, professionals and parents/carers
- **Stage 3:** Synthesis and idea development and testing

---

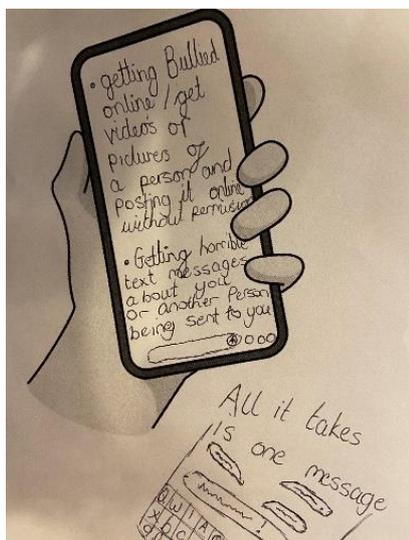
## Stage 1

We ran qualitative, in-person research with young people and professionals working with young people, and conducted desk research into existing online safety resources and interventions.

### Young people

We spoke to 35+ young people aged 11-25 in Leeds, Wakefield and Bradford across four focus groups:<sup>iii</sup>

- An apprentice scheme
- A youth group for young women
- A young mothers group
- A secondary school



During the focus groups, we used scenario-based exercises to ask young people about online harm experiences, their impact, and what support works. The questions we asked during these exercises were:

- *What might a bad online experience be?*
- *How might someone feel following this experience?*
- *What should this person do? (If you were their friend, what would you advise them to do?)*
- *What would make you and your friends feel safer, or more supported online?*

---

<sup>iii</sup> The groups included young people from different ethnic backgrounds and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

---

## Professionals working with young people

We conducted semi-structured research interviews with three professionals working with young people across Wakefield, Kirklees and Calderdale. Interviews included questions such as:

- *What problems have you heard about from the young people you work with involving social media?*
- *Do you think all young people are equally at risk of being negatively affected? Why/why not?*
- *Do you currently receive support for yourself?*
- *Do the young people you work with receive any particular support?*
- *What barriers might there be for your organisation getting involved in an intervention?*
- *What do you think is the best way to access young people for an intervention?*

<p><b>About you &amp; YP – 5 mins</b></p> <p>Could you describe a typical working day for you? Describe the people that you work with? We're particularly interested in those under the age of 25, so any contextualisation of this group comparative to your wider service base would be appreciated. What age range – what do under 25s account for in numbers How would you describe the demographic make-up of the people/young people?</p> <p><b>Upsetting content – 10 mins</b></p> <p>What problems have you heard about from the young people you work with involving social media? Who else was involved in managing this situation (parents, peers, other professionals)? Did you feel that any of these people would particularly have benefitted from additional support navigating online harms? Are there any other situations that come to mind?</p> <p>Out of the [issues discussed] which of these do you think is most common?</p> <p>Out of [issues discussed], which do you think has the worst effect on YP wellbeing?</p> <p>We've heard that cyberbullying and violent content might be common - does this align with your experience?</p> <p><b>Factors in routes to harm – 10 mins</b></p> <p>Do you think all young people are equally at risk of being negatively affected? Why/why not?</p> <p>Thinking about young people you've worked with who have been badly affected by something online, have they had any particular experiences or needs that need to be considered?</p> <p>What about protected characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality) - do you think that there are any groups who are more vulnerable to experiencing harm? (if yes) Why do you think that is?</p> <p>Are there particular areas in WY that you think require more support for young people to use online spaces safely?</p> <p>Of the people you work with who've been badly affected by something on social media - do you think age plays a part?</p>
--

## Research into existing interventions and resources

During this stage, we also conducted desk research into existing online safety resources and interventions, and created an inventory of resources classified by type, topic, target audience and cost. We included any resource or intervention that focused on one or more aspect of online safety. They could be targeted at school staff, parents/carers, young people themselves, or the general public. We mostly looked at UK-based interventions and resources, however we also included global interventions and resources where they already are or could be available in the UK (e.g. if they are available online). Alongside this desk research, we spoke to organisations local to West Yorkshire and organisations working nationally about their work in this sector. Overall, we reviewed 60+ interventions and resources from 30+ organisations.

---

## Stage 2

We used the findings from Stage 1 to develop online anonymous surveys which we ran with young people aged 13-25, professionals working with young people and parents/carers across West Yorkshire. We shared these surveys via schools, the VRU and the West Yorkshire Adversity, Trauma and Resilience Network. These surveys contained mostly closed questions with pre-set response options based on our previous research and Stage 1 of this project, as well as a few open text questions. The total number of respondents to each of these surveys was:<sup>iv</sup>

- Young people: 78

---

<sup>iv</sup> More information on survey respondents can be found in Appendix A.

- 
- Professionals: 18
  - Parents/Carers: 52

---

### Stage 3

After analysing data from Stages 1 and 2, we developed a shortlist of principles and ideas for future interventions and tested these with one group of young people aged 18-24 and one group of professionals working with young people.

We were supported through all three stages by an expert Advisory Panel who provided professional and academic expertise on conducting trauma-informed research and on the issue areas this work addressed. The Advisory Panel consisted of:

- **Nicholas Carlisle**, CEO of [Power Of Zero](#), an international NGO bringing together UNESCO, UNICEF, Meta, Microsoft and NGOs around the world, dedicated to eradicating bullying and cyberbullying worldwide, and experienced child and family psychotherapist
- **Dr Nelli Ferenczi**, [Senior Lecturer in Psychology](#) with expertise on online prosocial and antisocial behaviour; previous panellist at an All Party Parliamentary Group event on Internet Trolling at the House of Commons

### Reading this report

This report is split into three parts, each addressing two research questions:

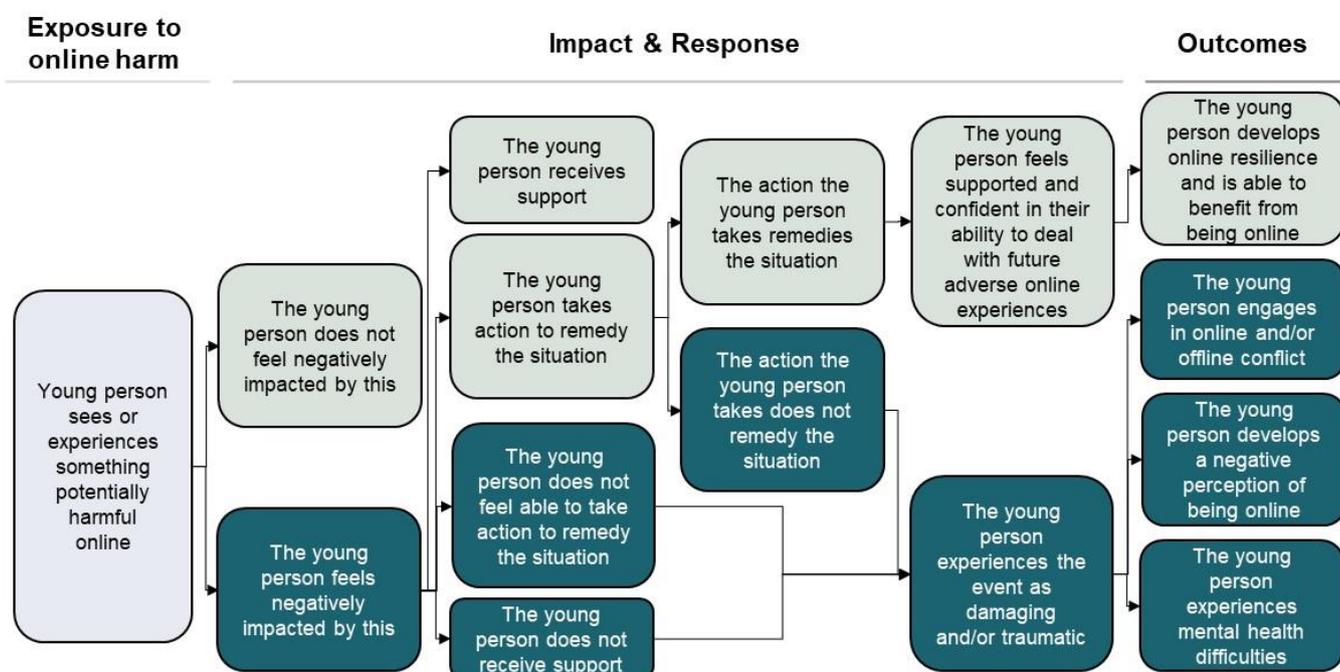
- **Part 1: The Level of Harm** – Research Questions 1 & 2
  - **Part 2: Current Support** – Research Questions 3 & 4
  - **Part 3: Intervening** – Research Questions 5 & 6
-

# Part 1: The Level of Harm

## Theory of Change

Prior to conducting any research, we developed a Theory of Change to develop and test throughout this project. This Theory of Change, seen in Figure 1, was based on our previous research and the knowledge and expertise of our Advisory Panel, and shows our ongoing understanding of the routes to harm in the context of online harms amongst children and young people.

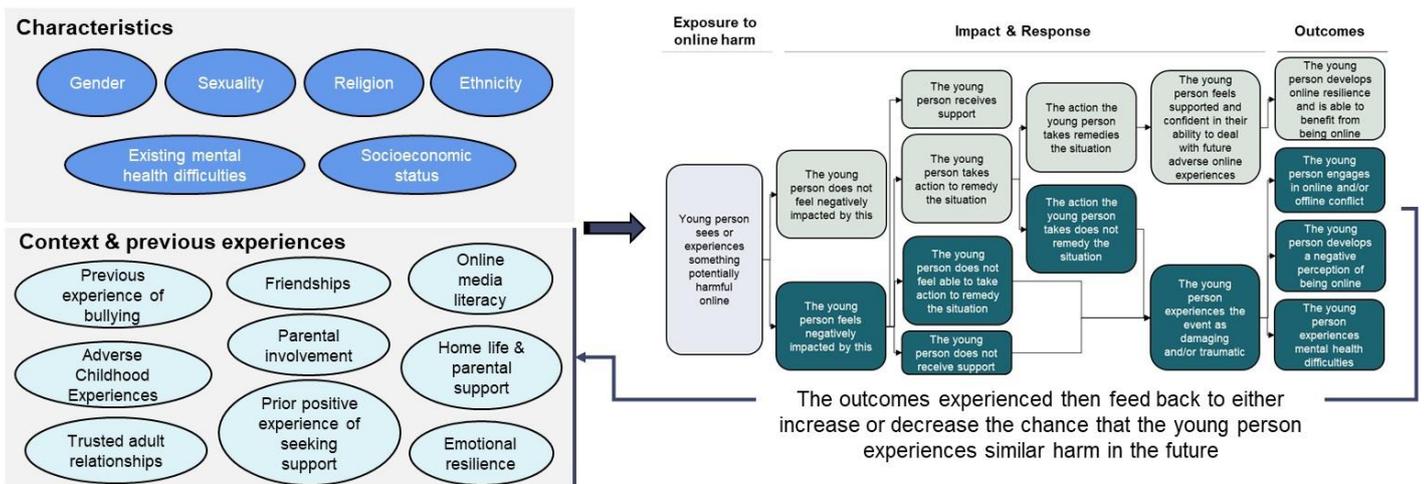
Figure 1: Theory of Change showing routes to harm



It is important to note that these pathways and routes to harm exist within a wider socioecological framework<sup>v</sup> that influences each individual's risk level. In Figure 2 below, each of the factors on the left influence a young person's experience at each stage of the pathway from experiencing something potentially harmful to experiencing negative outcomes:

<sup>v</sup> The 'socioecological framework' can be understood as a 'multi-level conceptualisation of health that includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, organisational, environmental, and public policy factors'; Scarneo, S. E., Kerr, Z. Y., Kroshus, E., Register-Mihalik, J. K., Hosokawa, Y., Stearns, R. L., DiStefano, L. J., & Casa, D. J. (2019). The Socioecological Framework: A Multifaceted Approach to Preventing Sport-Related Deaths in High School Sports. *Journal of athletic training*, 54(4), 356–360. <https://doi.org/10.4085/1062-6050-173-18>

Figure 2: Routes to harm theory of change within a socioecological framework

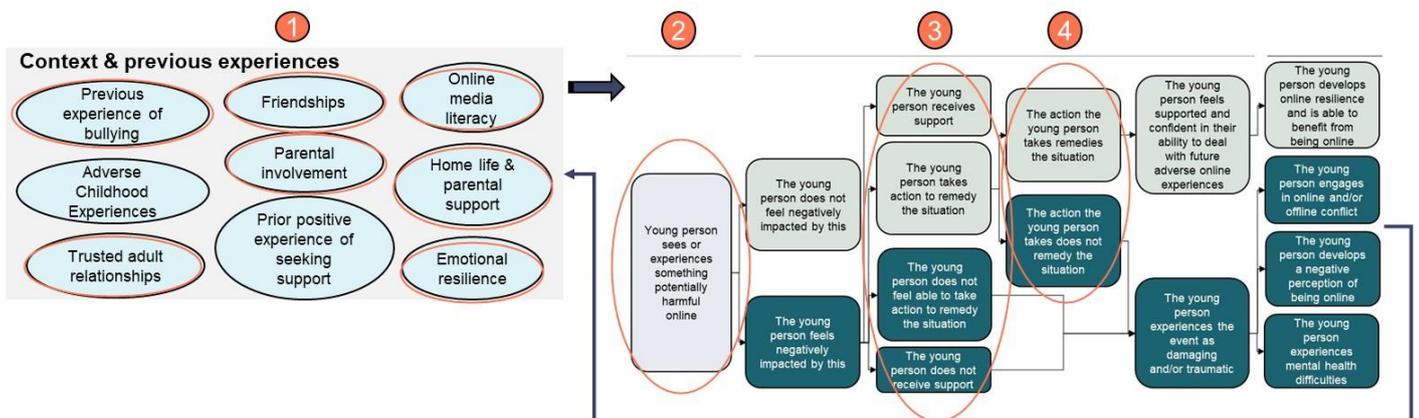


When exploring possible online harms interventions, there are different points within these routes to harm and/or the surrounding contextual factors that could be targeted. For example, interventions could:

1. **Focus on contextual factors:** aim to address some of the socioecological factors that affect individuals' risk levels to experiencing harm by, for example, building emotional resilience, supporting stronger friendships, or improving parental involvement
2. **Reduce exposure:** aim to reduce how often young people are exposed to harmful content online
3. **Increase support-seeking:** encourage more young people to reach out for support when they do experience online harm and build better pathways for young people to do this
4. **Improve support infrastructure:** improve the support provided when young people do experience online harm and reach out for support, so that this support is more likely to be effective and empowering

This is laid out in Figure 3 below, where the numbers correspond to the list above.

Figure 3: Possible intervention points in the routes to harm



---

# Findings

It should be noted that the findings presented here are based on small sample sizes<sup>vi</sup> and alone cannot be used to draw broad conclusions about young people's experiences across West Yorkshire. However, many of these findings align with wider research conducted in this field, as we have indicated in relevant places.

## Research Question #1: What (upsetting) content do children and young people see on social media most, and what is the impact?

Based on our previous research, we categorised potentially harmful experiences online into things that young people see online – *content* – and things that another person does to a young person online – *contact*. Under this categorisation, we included all experiences where the young person is directly contacted or targeted under 'potentially harmful contact', and all types of content that might be upsetting when viewed by a young person, but are not specifically targeted at them, under 'potentially harmful content'. For example, cyberbullying and harassment experiences are categorised as contact, while violent images are content. This is similar to other categorisations of online harms.<sup>6</sup>

The top three platforms that were mentioned most by young people as places where they were experiencing potential harm were Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok. We heard from young people that Snapchat's feature whereby messages are time-limited potentially increases the risk of both harassment and illegal activity (such as sale of drugs and weapons), as the 'evidence' of this would disappear. However, we also heard from young people that they particularly liked Snapchat's feature whereby users are notified if someone takes a screenshot of something the user has sent to them, and said they would want to see this integrated into other apps for an increased sense of safety.

### Potentially harmful contact

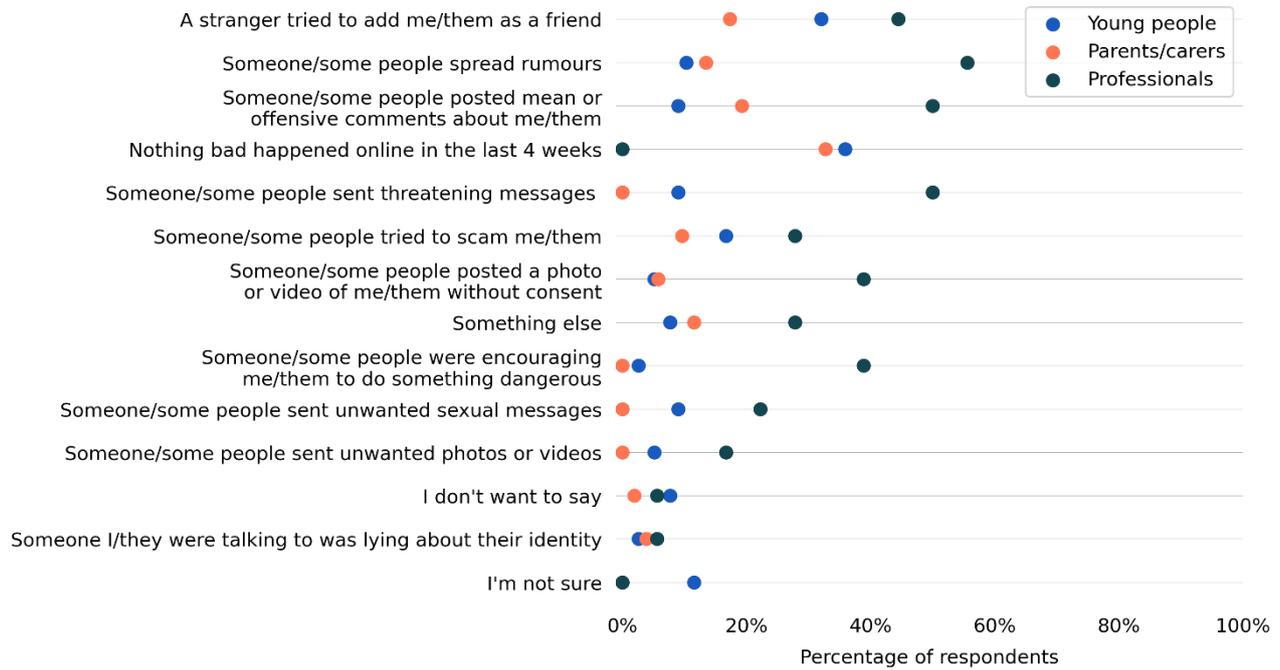
Over 4 in 10 (44%) of the young people responding to our survey had experienced at least one of the types of potentially harmful contact that we asked about in the last month. The most commonly experienced potentially harmful contact online in the past month was a stranger trying to add a young person as a friend. Figure 4 below shows the percentage of each survey respondent group who reported experiencing/ knowing of a young person experiencing each type of potentially harmful contact asked about.

---

<sup>vi</sup> Numbers of participants in focus groups and survey respondents are given in the Methodology section.

Figure 4: Experiences of harmful contact. N: Young people=78, Professionals=18, Parents/carers=52

Have you/your children/children you work with experienced any of the following things online in the last 4 weeks?



As seen in Figure 4 above, a higher proportion of professionals reported that young people had experienced all types of potentially harmful contact than the proportion of young people who reported this happening. This could be partly explained by the fact that professionals involved in our research interact with a high number of young people, increasing the likelihood they may encounter an incident, and some work with young people who have particular vulnerabilities that may make them more likely to be targeted online.

## Bullying

Based on the frequency with which cyberbullying was mentioned in our qualitative research in Stage 1, we included extra questions about bullying experiences in our surveys in Stage 2. Many of the potentially harmful contact experiences that young people had experienced in the past four weeks can be considered cyberbullying and/or harassment behaviours, as shown in Figure 5 below:

Figure 5: Experiences of cyberbullying and harassment behaviour. N: Young people=78, Professionals=18, Parents/carers=52

Have you/your children/children you work with experienced any of the following things online in the last 4 weeks?

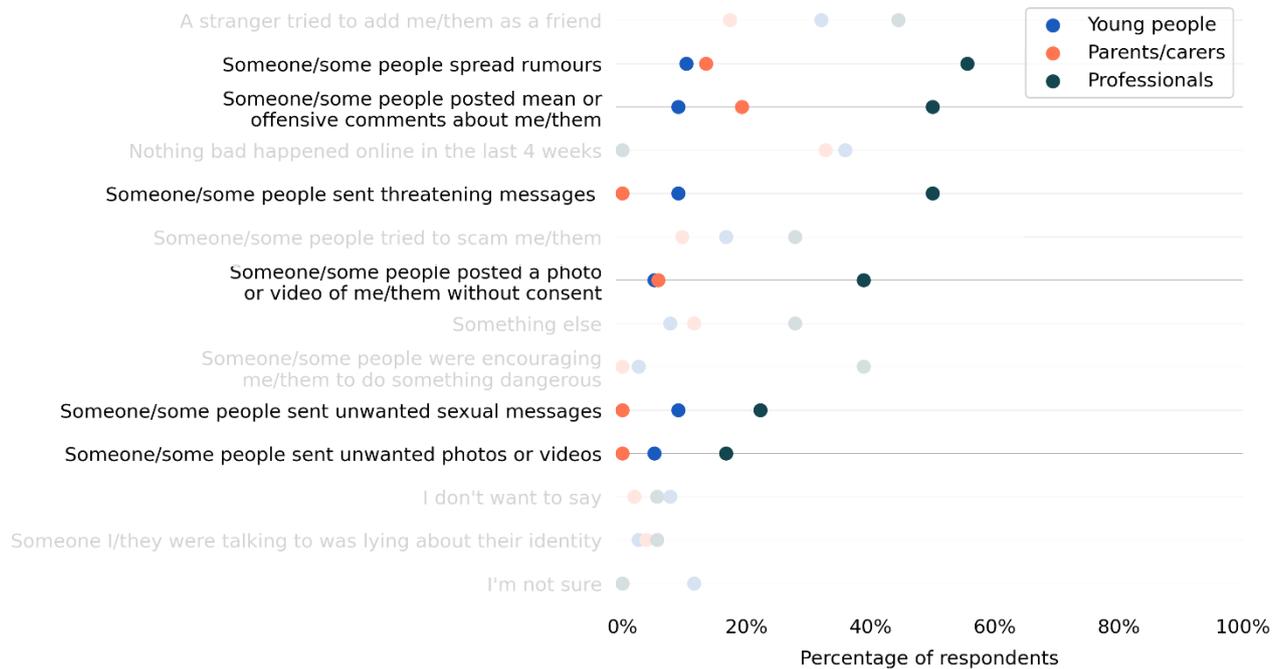


Figure 5 shows that parents and carers reported no instances of half of the behaviours we believe indicate either bullying or harassment, indicating a possibility that parents and carers may not have good visibility of some of the potentially harmful content their child experiences online. When asked specifically about bullying, a minority of respondents indicated that they or a young person they cared for had been bullied online in the past four weeks:

- 6 of 78 young people said they'd been bullied online in last 4 weeks
- 10 of 33 parents reported that their children had been bullied online in the last 4 weeks

Over 70% of young people who reported having experienced bullying behaviour did not consider themselves to have been bullied

However, results indicate that some young people may not recognise bullying behaviours as such. More than 70% of young people who reported having been sent threatening messages or having people posting mean or offensive comments about them in the last 4 weeks, didn't consider themselves to have been bullied.

As shown in Figures 6 and 7 below, both young people and parents and carers reported more experiences of offline bullying than online bullying. Parents and carers only reported online bullying when it was happening in conjunction with offline.

Figure 6: Young person survey, experiences of bullying. N=78

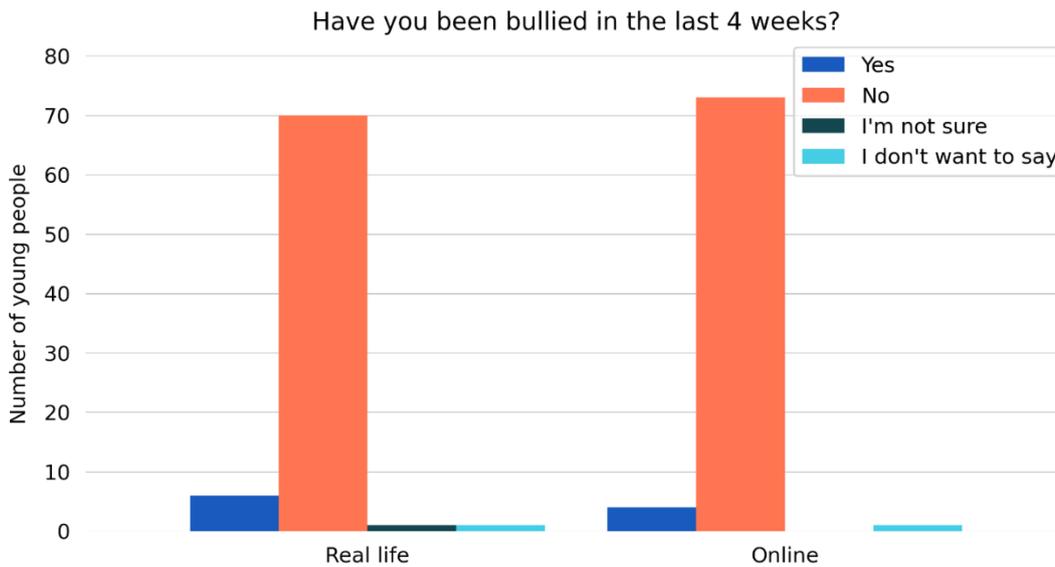
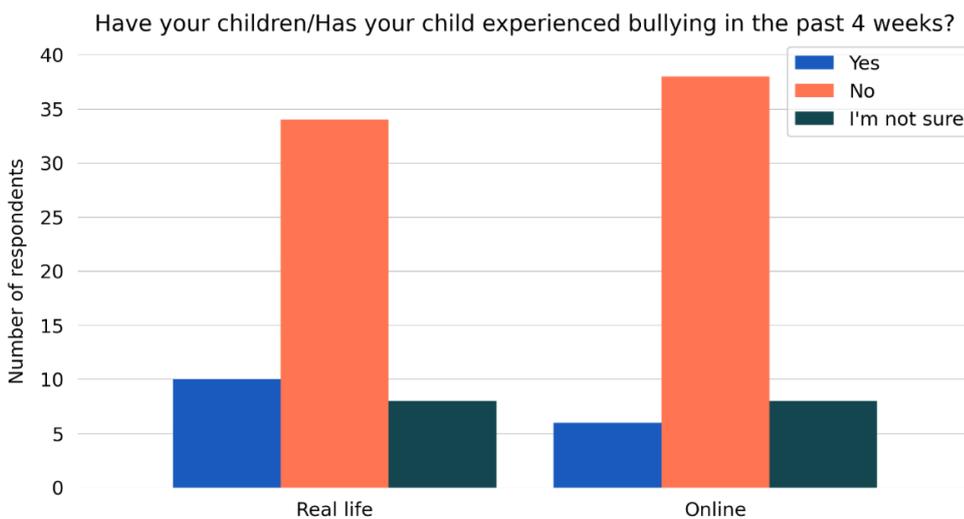


Figure 7: Parents and carers survey, experiences of bullying. N=33



Young people who experienced bullying or harassment behaviour most commonly said that the perpetrator was known to them in real life (42%). A fifth of those responding were unaware of who was targeting them as the perpetrator used an anonymous account.

When asked about the contact that had the most negative impact on them, survey respondents exclusively reported contact that amounted to bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment (including one instance of sextortion<sup>vii</sup>).

<sup>vii</sup> Sextortion is a form of blackmail. The perpetrator threatens to private or sensitive material about a person. This is usually done to extort money. The perpetrator may coerce someone into sharing intimate images or videos of themselves by assuming a fake identity (<https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/sexual-offences/sextortion>)

---

When asked which experience made them feel worst, young people selected:

- *Someone/some people sent me threatening messages online*
- *Someone sent me sexual messages when I didn't want them to*
- *Someone/some people spread rumours about me online*
- *Someone sent me photos or videos of them or of someone else when I didn't want them to*
- *Someone/some people posted mean or offensive comments about me online*
- *Sextortion scam*

### **Perpetrators**

14% of young people reported sending mean or offensive messages in the past month – generally to someone they knew in real life. A very small number said they had posted pictures or videos intended to embarrass someone.

### **Potentially harmful content**

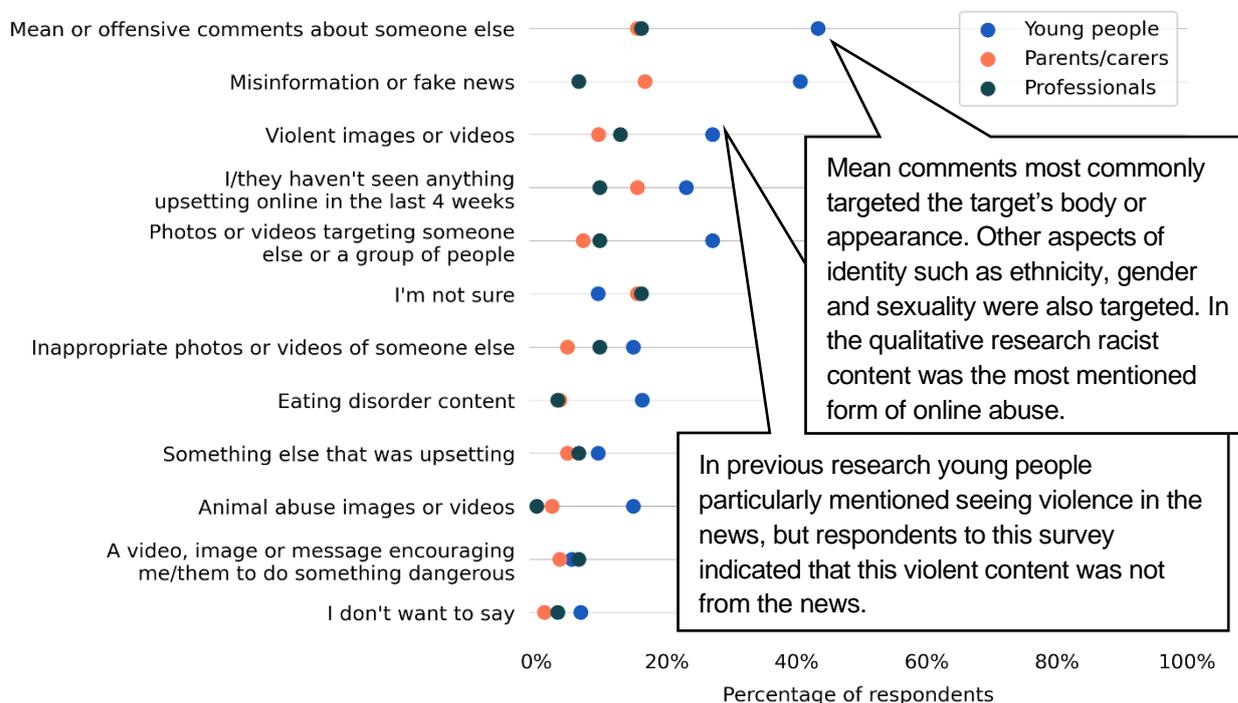
Most young people had seen something potentially harmful online in the past month

Young people are more likely to encounter potentially harmful content than experience potentially harmful contact. While 44% of young people reported experiencing potentially harmful contact online, 60% of young people had seen potentially harmful content online in the last four weeks.

The most commonly seen type of potentially harmful content was mean or offensive comments about someone else, followed by misinformation or fake news. Figure 8 below shows the proportions of young people, professionals and parents/carers who said they or young people under their care had seen each type of potentially harmful content in the past month.

Figure 8: Frequency of potentially harmful content encountered. N: Young people = 74, Parents/carers = 84, Professionals = 31. Nb: Young people were asked about 'Pictures, messages or videos that made me feel sad about my body' which has been grouped into eating disorder content, but may capture a wider range of content.

Have you/your children/children you work with seen any of the following things online in the last 4 weeks?



As seen in Figure 8 above, higher proportions of young people reported seeing potentially harmful content online in the past month than the proportions of professionals and parents/carers who reported young people having seen these things. This is the opposite pattern from what was seen with potentially harmful contact experiences and suggests that professionals and parents/carers may not be aware of the extent of young people’s exposure to potentially harmful content online.

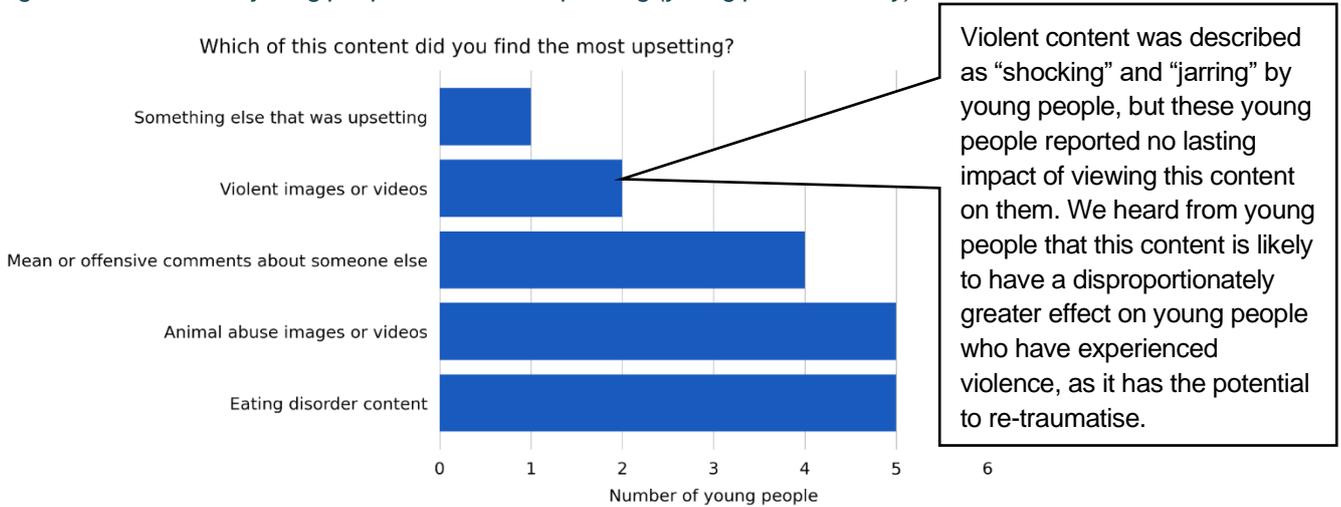
In our previous research, a higher proportion of young people mentioned seeing violence and gore content online than that who saw mean comments; this time, we found the opposite. It is possible that the timings of the two research projects had an impact on this, as the previous research was carried out at the time of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and many young people reported viewing footage from this war online at that time, which was not reported in this phase of the research<sup>viii</sup>.

The types of content that were rated by young people as most upsetting were eating disorder content and animal abuse content, as shown in Figure 9 below. While misinformation and fake news were commonly seen, this was rated as less upsetting than other types of content. This mirrors findings from the Internet Matters Year 2 Digital Index, which found that ‘seeing things you think aren’t true’ was the most common experience, but also the experience children felt had the least impact on them.<sup>7</sup> However,

<sup>viii</sup> The two surveys reached roughly the same age group and ethnicity demographics. The current survey reached a higher proportion of young boys (previous survey; 28%, current; 41%) than previously. However, we found no significant difference in exposure to violent content between girls and boys. Similarly, there was a higher proportion of 13-15 year olds responding to the previous survey (45%, current; 38%). No analysis has been conducted on exposure risk and age. In the previous survey the majority of respondents lived in Calderdale, whereas in the current one the majority of respondents went to school in Leeds.

it should be noted that it is possible that young people may still experience harm from misinformation and fake news in the longer-term but not recognise it in the immediate term.

Figure 9: Content that young people found most upsetting (young person survey). N=17



### Impact of online harms

Young people responding to our survey were asked how they felt after experiencing harmful contact or content via a multiple choice question. The following word clouds visualise their responses, with bigger words indicating a higher frequency of this response.

Following experiences of harmful **contact**, young people said they felt...



After viewing harmful **content**, young people said they felt...



The impact discussed most by young people was low self-esteem

Young people also highlighted that online harms can lead to very serious psychological outcomes such as feeling suicidal, and self-harming. The impact discussed most by young people in our qualitative research was the effect that online harms can have on young people’s self-esteem. In particular, online bullying and harassment and unrealistic beauty standards were highlighted as negatively impacting self-esteem. Adolescence is a formative age for developing both self-esteem and a sense of self; disruption of this can have a lifelong impact for a psychological adjustment, well-being,

---

and mental health outcomes. For example, research has found that self-esteem can predict success in life domains such as relationships, work and health.<sup>8</sup>

In our qualitative research, young people noted that bullying and harassment may have long term impacts regarding the development of social skills, potentially affecting how someone interacts with and relates to others for the rest of their life, as well as impacting educational attainment through causing the target to not want to attend school and/or struggle to concentrate when they are in school.

---

## Research Question #2: Are subgroups of children and young people particularly at risk of the negative impacts?

### Gender

When we asked young people about experiences of potentially harmful **contact**, a higher proportion of **girls** than **boys** said they experienced:

- **rumours being spread** about them (16% girls, 6% boys);
- **someone they didn't know trying to add them as a friend** (39% girls, 28% boys); and
- **behaviours indicating sexual harassment** ('someone sending photos or videos of themselves that I didn't want to see' - 8% girls, 3% boys; 'someone sent sexual messages when I didn't want them to' - 11% girls, 6% boys).

A higher proportion of **boys** than **girls** said that they:

- had someone try and **scam them** (21% boys, 11% girls); and/or
- had a photo or video posted of them without consent (9% boys, 3% girls).

Only boys said that they experienced catfishing<sup>ix</sup> or being encouraged to do something dangerous, but these were both uncommon (3% each). There was minimal difference in the proportion of girls and boys who said that nothing bad had happened to them online in the last 4 weeks (35% girls, 34% boys).

All forms of potentially harmful content had been seen by a higher proportion of girls than boys

When looking at the impact of potentially harmful contact by gender, **38% of boys** who responded to this question said that these experiences made them feel bad, compared to **26% of girls** who responded.

When asked about potentially harmful **content**, a higher proportion of girls had seen all forms of potentially harmful content. There were clear differences between girls and boys with regards to how often they had seen different types of potentially harmful content in the past month:

- Only **girls** reported seeing **pictures, messages or videos that made them feel sad about their** body (31%).

---

<sup>ix</sup> Speaking to someone online whose identity turned out to be different from what they said it was

- A higher proportion of **girls** than **boys** said they see **mean or offensive comments about someone else** (57% girls, 29% boys), and/or **photos or videos targeting someone else or a group of people** (42% girls, 16% boys).

Conversely to potentially harmful contact experiences, 52% of **girls** responding to the follow-on question about whether seeing this content had made them feel bad said that it did, while the proportion of **boys** who said it made them feel bad was the same as that for potentially harmful contact, at 38%.

While the data in this study is not sufficient to draw any wider conclusions, these findings raise an interesting question on whether the effects of content vs contact experiences online are differently moderated by gender and therefore need nuanced intervention approaches.

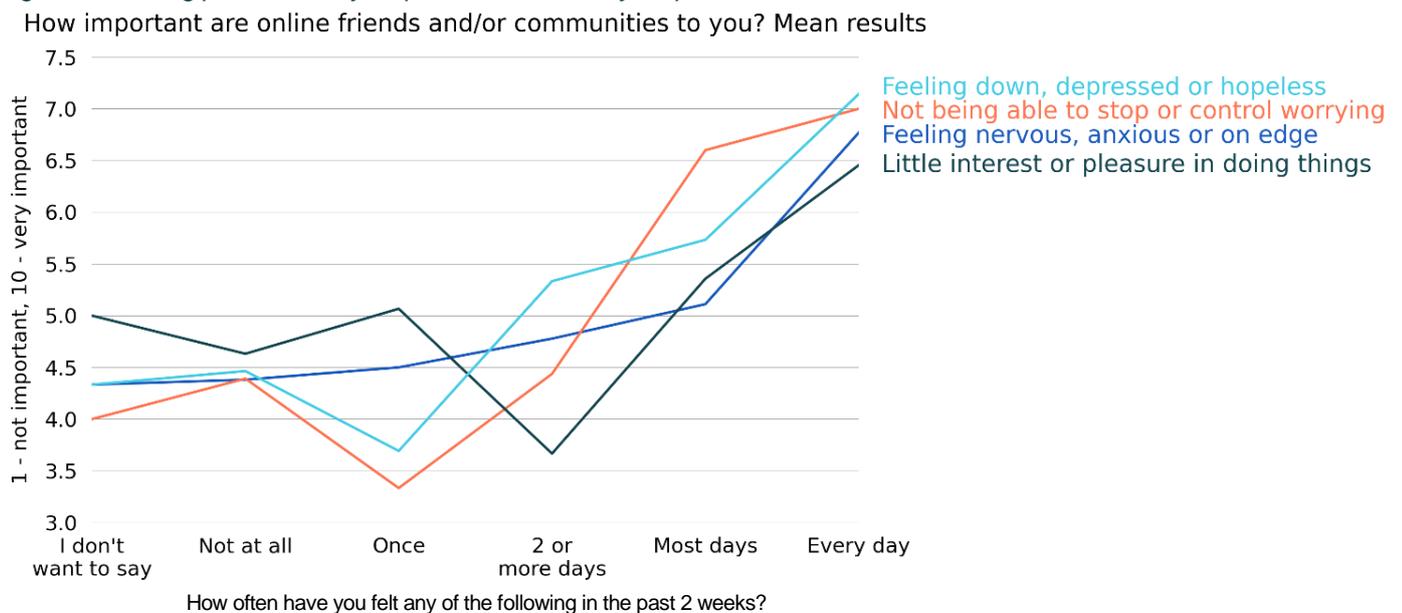
### Mental health and minoritised identities

Young people who had a higher frequency of anxious and/or depressive thoughts rated online communities as more important to them

Young people and professionals in our qualitative research told us they thought young people of **minoritised ethnicities, sexualities and gender identities** may be more at risk of online harm, and that **difficulties at home, lack of parental involvement** and **existing mental health difficulties** may also increase this risk. When looking at the survey data, we found no pattern in who said online experiences had made them feel bad by whether or not they were receiving treatment

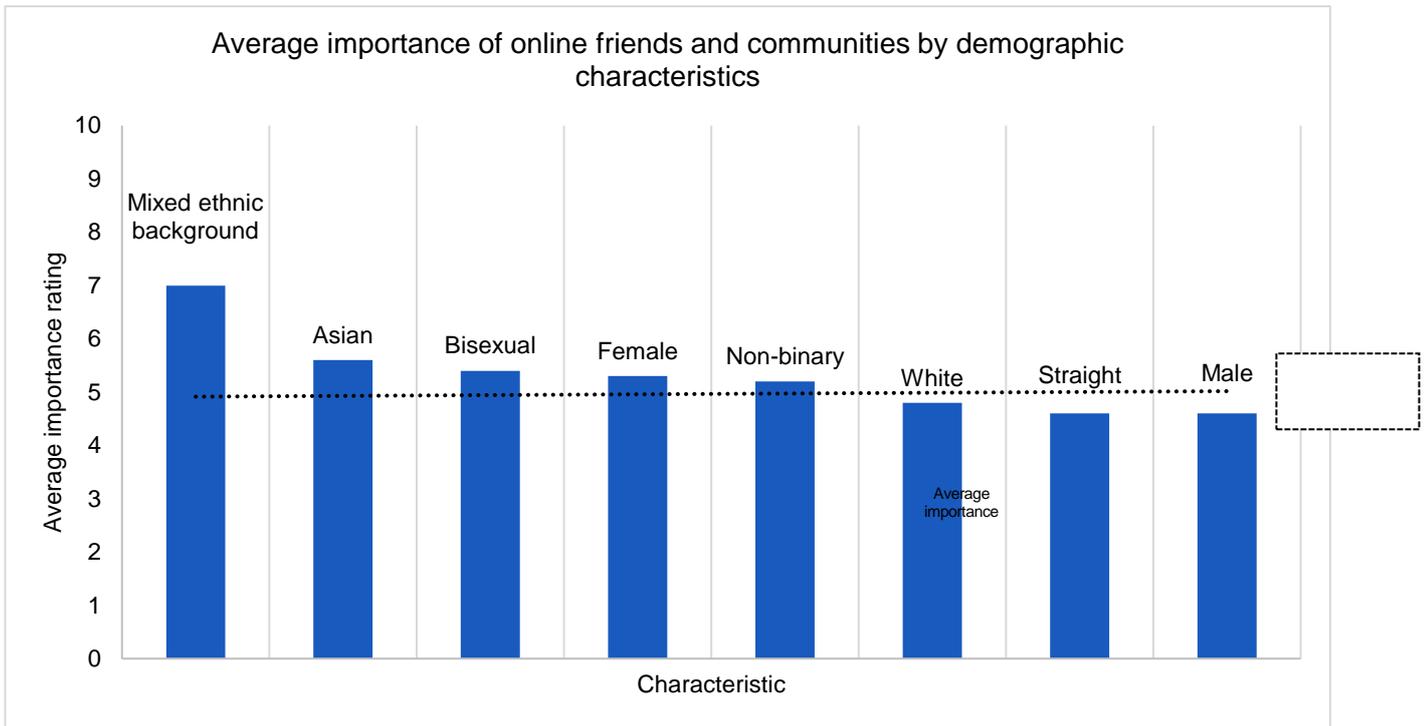
for or on a waiting list for treatment for mental health difficulties. However, the data did show a clear trend whereby the more frequent young people said anxious or depressive thoughts had been over the past two weeks, the more important they rated online communities to be, as shown in Figure 10 below, suggesting that young people experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression may be more dependent on online communities.

Figure 10: Young person survey, experiences of anxiety, depression, and online communities. N=76



In addition, young women, young people of minoritised genders and sexualities, and young people from non-white backgrounds also rated online communities as more important to them, as shown in Figure 11 below:

Figure 11: Young person survey; average importance of online friends and communities, gender: N=73; ethnicity: N=72; sexuality: N=56. Nb: ratings only produced where there were 5 or more respondents. 1=not at all important; 10=extremely important.



The data thus suggests that online communities are more important to young people belonging to minoritised groups.<sup>x</sup> This has been found also in wider research – for example, a 2019 study found that online fandom offered unique opportunities for identity formation for sexual and gender minority youth.<sup>9</sup> During one of our focus groups, a young person spoke about using an online platform that is specifically targeted at neurodivergent people, and how she found this very beneficial for her. However, an increased dependence on online communities may mean these young people are more likely to experience a potentially harmful experience online, due to spending more time online, and may be more likely to be negatively impacted by this, given the relative importance of these online spaces for them.

*“...plenty of good things can also come out of making new friends online, if you can't make friends in real life [...] I'm on a social media platform where it's actually an obligation to verify who you are which is really good. It's social media for neurodiverse people where you can meet people and like get into relationships and stuff like that and make friends.”*

<sup>x</sup> Further statistical analysis would be needed to identify if the differences are significant.

---

45% of young people experiencing potentially harmful contact said they disengaged from online communities afterwards

If a negative experience happens within an online community that a young person relies on for support, they may be more likely to withdraw from the online space altogether. While the data did not allow us to assess whether young people in the groups identified above specifically were more or less likely to disengage from online communities following experiences of online harm, the data did show that some young people engage

less with online communities as a result of experiencing online harm. This was particularly true of young people experiencing harmful **contact**, 45% of whom said that they disengaged from online communities afterwards. Disengaging from online communities means young people then are less able to experience the benefits of being online, and risk becoming further isolated. This is therefore a particularly important effect of online harm experiences to look out for among young people in minoritised groups.

The hypothesis that young people who belong to minoritised groups may be more dependent on online communities and more at risk of experiencing online harm is supported by wider research. For example, the Year 2 Index Report of Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World from Internet Matters found that children in families facing challenging financial circumstances, and those who have disabilities, mental health issues or SEND experience more negative effects from digital technology across all measured dimensions of their wellbeing than those in families without these challenges. The report also reported a higher incidence of online experiences that are considered harmful, and that these experiences, when they occurred, had a worse effect on them than children in other families.<sup>10</sup>

## Part 2: Current Support

### Research Question #3: What is being done within West Yorkshire schools and communities to support children and young people in using social media safely; what is lacking?

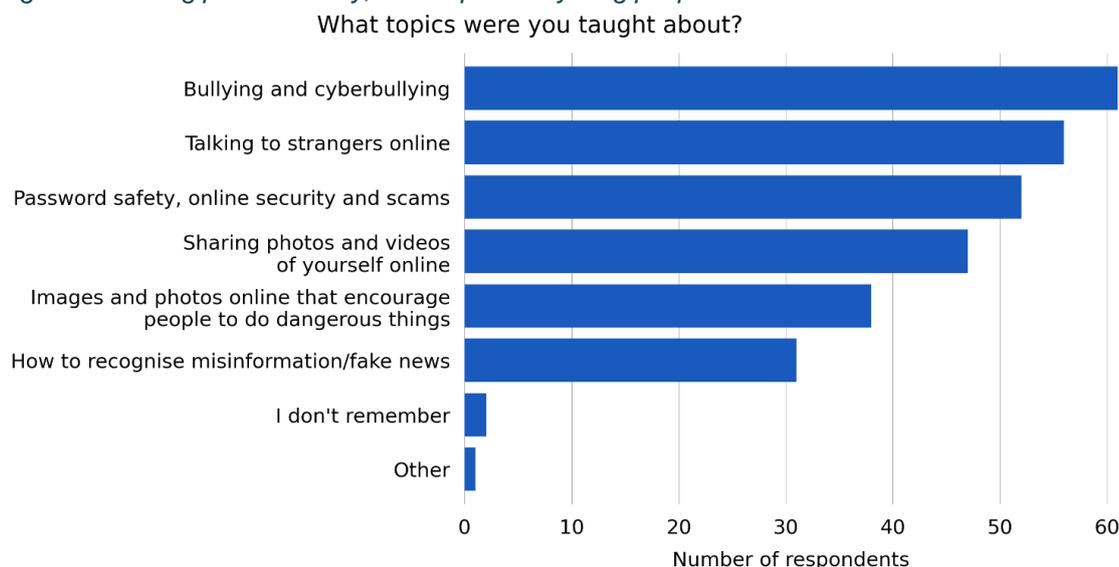
#### Young people

When asked about whether they had received any teaching on online safety in the survey, 91% of the young people who responded to the online survey said they had been taught about being safe online. This reflects findings from the qualitative research where almost all young people said they had received some teaching on online safety. 8 in 10 young people said they were taught about online safety by a teacher or someone at school, and almost 5 in 10 said their parents had taught them. Figure 12 below shows the topics that young people said they had been taught about. The most common responses were:

- Bullying/Cyberbullying (92%)
- Talking to strangers online (85%)
- Password safety, online security and scams (79%)

It is important to note here that despite almost all young people saying they had been taught about bullying and cyberbullying, we found experiences of cyberbullying to be still very prevalent.

Figure 12: Young person survey, what topics are young people educated on. N=66

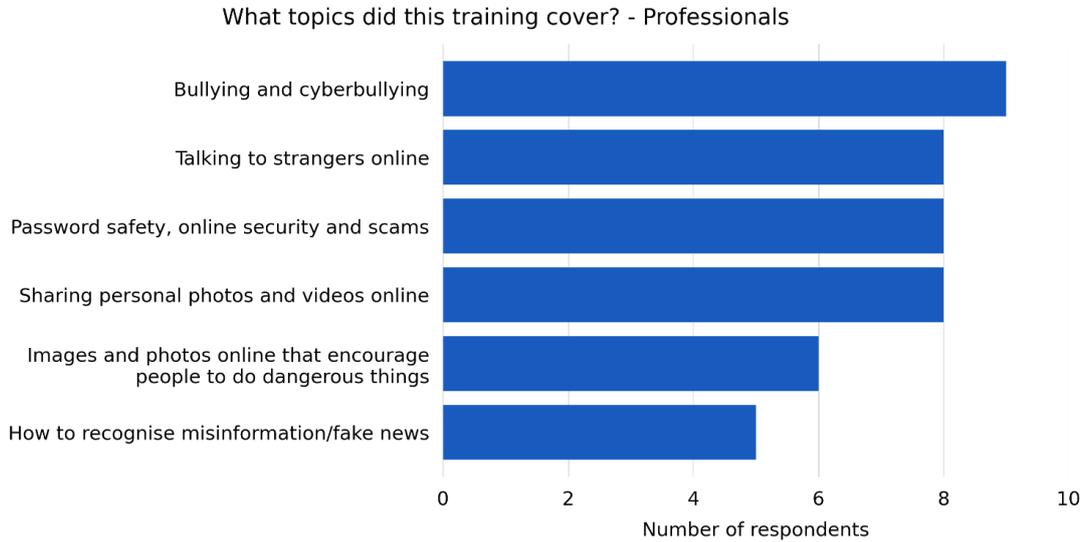


Most young people said they were taught about online safety in Years 7-10 (66%), with Year 10 being most common (51%). Over half (64%) of young people said they had received teaching on online safety in primary school.

## Professionals

Most (71%) professionals who responded to our online survey said they had received some training on online harms. Cyberbullying was the most covered topic, and misinformation was the least covered. Figure 13 below shows the breakdown of topics covered.

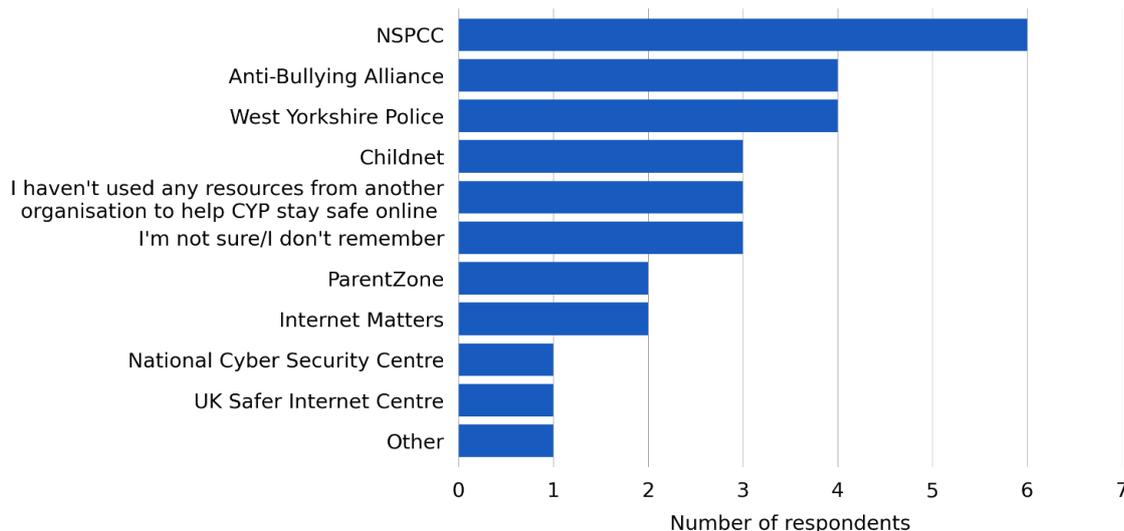
Figure 13: Professional survey, what topics professionals received training on. N=10



When asked whether they had accessed public resources from third sector organisations, 46% said they had accessed resources from the NSPCC. Other resources that professionals said they had used came from the West Yorkshire Police and the Anti-Bullying Alliance. Figure 14 below shows different online safety resources that professionals said they had used:

Figure 14: Professionals survey, resources used by professionals. N=13

Have you ever used resources about helping CYP stay safe online from any of the following organisations? - Professionals



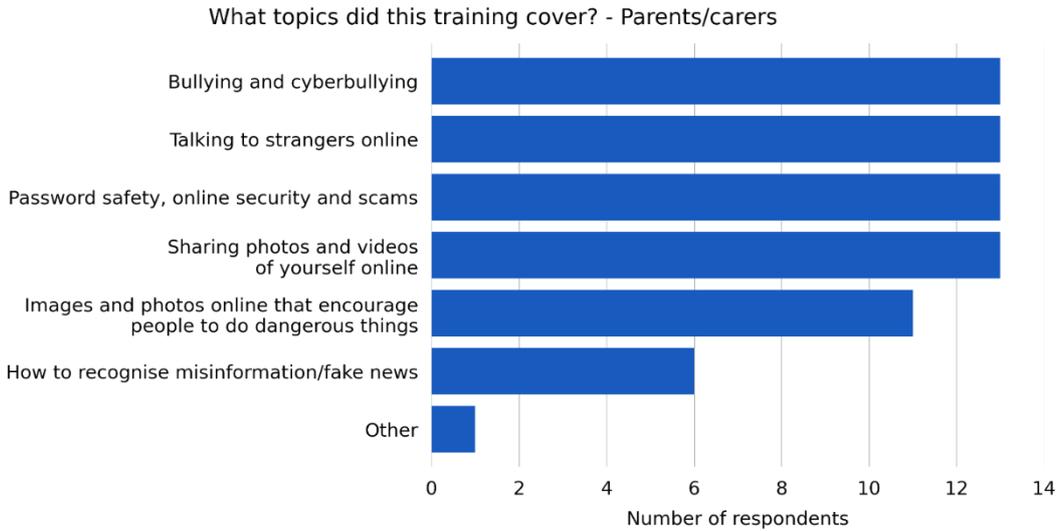
When asked what actions they had taken in response to an incident of harmful contact involving young people they worked with, professionals said that they most frequently advised young people to talk to a parent/carer about it, followed by reporting the post or message online. With regards to potentially harmful content, they most commonly advised the young person to report the post or message.

## Parents and carers

When asked what they currently do to keep their children safe online, parents and carers who responded to our survey said that they place restrictions on their children's use of social media, and highlighted the importance of communicating well with their children. When asked about education and training, one third said that they had accessed training on online harms.

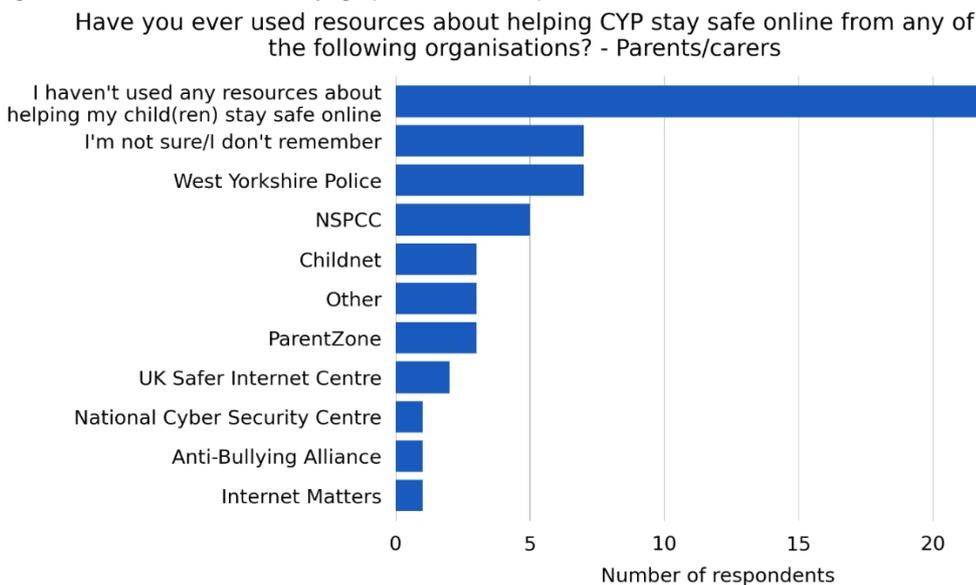
Topics covered in training accessed by parents and carers included password safety, online security, sharing personal photos and images, talking to strangers online, and bullying and cyberbullying. Training on misinformation and fake news was relatively rare. Figure 15 below shows the different topics that parents/carers said they had received training on:

Figure 15: Parents/carers survey, topics that parents/carers training covered. N=15



The public resources most commonly accessed by parents/carers came from West Yorkshire Police. Other resources accessed are shown in Figure 16 below:

Figure 16: Parents/carers survey, graph of resources parents/carers have used. N=45



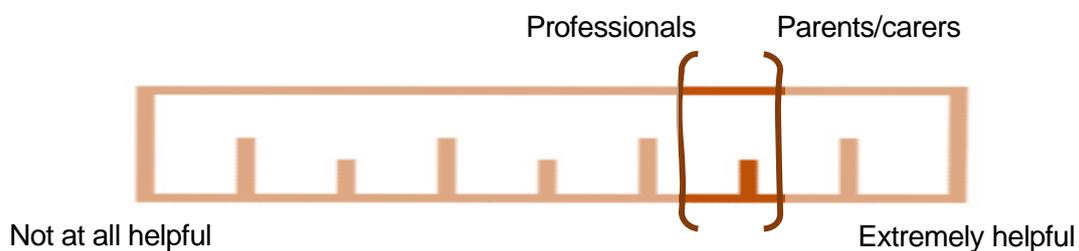
Finally, when asked what actions they had taken in response to an incident of harmful contact involving their child(ren), the most common advice parents/carers gave young people was to delete the app or stop going on it. Second to this was to speak to a teacher or report the post or message. In our qualitative research, we heard that advising young people to stop using apps was unrealistic, given the popularity of social media apps and social pressures to be on the same apps as friends. When we asked young people in focus groups what they would advise others to do, deleting the app or stopping going on it was an uncommon response; blocking, reporting, and talking to someone else about the issue were the most common. With regards to potentially harmful content, the most common advice parents and carers gave was to talk to a teacher or another parent or carer.

*“And I think getting into the mind of a young person, [social media is] their complete world at that point. So telling them to come off the app or change them, it’s just not gonna happen.”*

### Research Question #4: What do children and young people, practitioners and parents/carers think about existing support? What does ‘good’ look like?

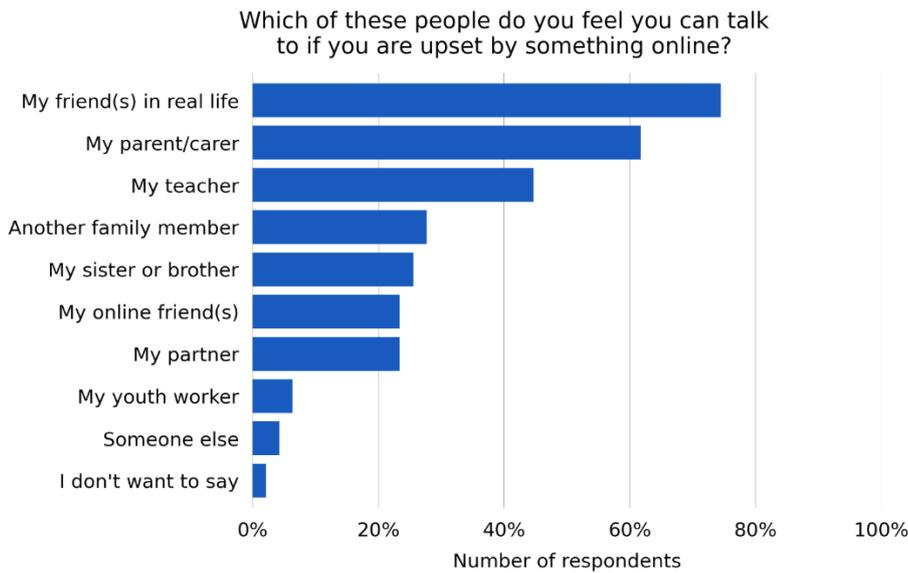
Professionals and parents/carers generally rated the resources they accessed as helpful (7/10 and 8/10 respectively). Professionals noted in both in-person research and the survey that it is difficult for them to keep up with the ever-changing tech landscape.

Figure 17: Professionals and parents/carers surveys. Visualisation of helpfulness ratings of online harms resources.



Most (69%) young people said that they feel they have someone they can talk to if something bad happens to them online. This was most commonly ‘my friend(s) in real life’, as shown in Figure 18 below:

Figure 18: Young person survey, who do young people feel they can talk to about online harms. N=47



Young people expressed an awareness that teachers’ time and capacity to help them with online harm experiences is limited. Young people felt that online harms are not taken seriously enough by schools and police. Similarly, other research has found that as many as 43% of secondary school-age students in West Yorkshire thought their school wouldn’t help to stop bullying/cyberbullying if they experienced it.<sup>11</sup>

*“Teachers [should take] it more seriously. Don't go ‘oh it happened outside of school time. It's got nowt to do with us.’ Because it's affecting that child's mental health. It's affecting their learning and at the end of the day it could affect their results. And why isn't that being taken into account?”*

Several young people said that they felt online harms are not taken as seriously as offline harms by schools and police, and they believed schools would ignore online harms incidents if they happen outside of school hours. One young person in a focus group drew a comparison with incidents of violence, arguing that if a student was caught fighting outside of school this would still be dealt with by the school. The young people told us that if school staff refuse to act in the instance of online harms, this ignores the emotional impact that this experience may have had on them.

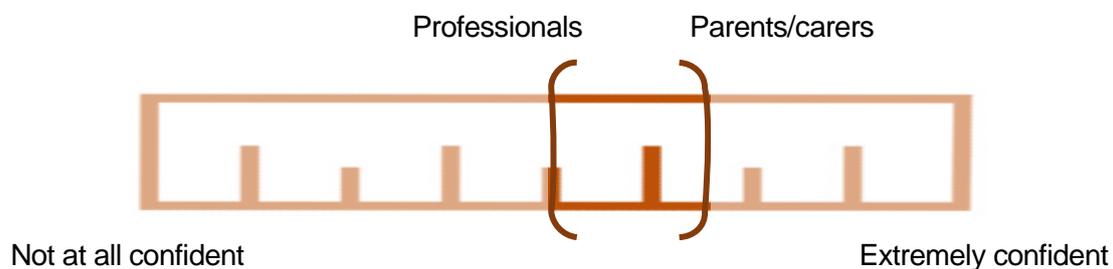
*“Well, if you are caught cyberbullying, maybe you should get a detention. Maybe you should get that [...] Well yeah because if your caught fighting outside of school premises. Just outside of school premises you get excluded, or suspended or whatever it is. So if you can do that with violence[...] just cause it's not violence doesn't mean it doesn't have an emotional impact on someone because it does.”*

Parents/carers generally felt confident in being able to support their children with online harm experiences (average rating of 7/10 confidence). Professionals felt less confident (average rating of 5/10 confidence) and said they would welcome further training. Young people had mostly positive experiences after speaking to either parents/carers or professionals. After an incident of harmful contact,

---

two young people who spoke to their teacher said they either felt a lot better or no different; of three who spoke to a parent or carer, two reported feeling a lot better, and one a bit better.

Figure 19: Professionals and parents/carers surveys. Visualisation of confidence in addressing online harms incidents with young people.



# Part 3: Intervening

## Research Question #5: What is done elsewhere; how effective is this?

In order to understand what is already available in terms of interventions, training and support on online harms issues, we conducted desk research to identify existing interventions and resources on online safety in the UK and globally. Through this research, we analysed over 60 interventions or resources from over 30 different providers, and mapped 50+ of these in an Airtable directory.

Intervention/Resource Name	Organisation	Type of Intervention/Res...	Issue areas	Duration of Intervention...	Target User			
12 Digital Awareness Resources	Digital Awareness	Guidance Materials	Lesson	Not Stated	N/A	Parents/Carers		
13 Digital Matters	internetmatters.org	Lesson Plans/Teaching Materials	Cyberbullying	Misinformation and fake news	Info	N/A	Teachers/Educators	
14 Digital Parenting Online	Vodafone	Guidance Materials	Online Citizenship	Cyberbullying	Misinformation	N/A	Parents/Carers	
15 Digital Resilience Framework	UK Council for Internet Safety	Audit / Self-Assessment Tools	Digital Resilience	Not Stated	N/A	Teachers/Educators		
16 Early Years Program	Power of Zero	Expert-Delivered Training	Not Stated	12-24 weeks	Teachers/Educators			
17 Educating Children on how to stay safe ...	eaware	Audit / Self-Assessment Tools	Cyberbullying	Misinformation and fake news	Online	N/A	Teachers/Educators	
18 Education for a Connected World	UK Council for Internet Safety	Guidance Materials	Self-image	Online Relationships	Cyberbullying	N/A	Teachers/Educators	
19 Home Safety Activities	Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre	Lesson Plans/Teaching Materials	Social Media	Gaming	Cybersecurity	Online Relationships	N/A	Parents/Carers
20 Internet Matters Resources	Internet Matters	Lesson Plans/Teaching Materials	Misinformation and fake news	Cyberbullying	Group	N/A	CYP, Parents/Carers	
21 Media and Digital Literacy	PSHE Association	Lesson Plans/Teaching Materials	Pornography	SEND	Cybersecurity	Online Relationships	N/A	Teachers/Educators
22 Multiagency Resources and Recorded Training	Wakefield Safeguarding Children's Partnership	Guidance Materials	Grooming	Gaming	'The Dark Web'	Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation	One time use materials	CYP, Teachers/Educators
23 No Bully Program	Power of Zero	Expert-Delivered Training	Cyberbullying	1 year	Teachers/Educators			
24 Online Abuse and Bullying Prevention Guidance	NSPCC / UK Gov	Lesson Plans/Teaching Materials	Cyberbullying	Online Hate	Four 45min - 1.5 hour or 2 ...	Teachers/Educators		
25 Online Risk to Children - Impact, Protection and Support	The Lucy Faithful Foundation	Book	Grooming	Cyberbullying	Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation	N/A	Professionals	

The interventions and resources identified through our research are mostly guidance materials and teaching materials for individuals and organisations to use by themselves. However, the inventory also includes externally delivered training, audit/self-assessment tools and advisory services. Existing interventions and resources focus on a range of topics; the most common topics these resources focus on are:

- Cyberbullying
- Online citizenship
- Misinformation and fake news

These interventions and resources aim to tackle online harms at different points in the route to harm:

- **Prevention** – these are resources/interventions that aim to prevent young people from accessing potentially harmful content or having potentially harmful experiences in the first place
- **Reduction** – these resources/interventions aim to reduce the amount of potentially harmful content and contact that young people experience, but not to remove the risk altogether
- **Mitigation** – these resources/interventions aim to mitigate further harm after a young person has seen or experienced something potentially harmful online

This inventory includes resources for children and young people, teachers/professionals working with children and young people, parents/carers, and tech platforms. They are mostly free to use. Our vision is

---

that this inventory can serve as a public resource that can be used by anyone to easily find online safety resources according to filters such as topic(s) covered and target audience.

Alongside our desk research, we spoke to contacts from:



**Wakefield Youth Hub** – the Youth Hub in Wakefield has developed their own set of four sessions for young people about key online harm experiences that the young people they work with regularly mention they have experienced



**Samaritans** – the Samaritans have a dedicated [Online Excellence Programme](#) which is developing a hub of excellence in suicide prevention and the online environment, working in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care and tech platforms. They have co-designed industry guidelines for tech platforms, an online harms advisory service for tech platforms and professionals working in this space, and a set of resources for young people, parents, teachers and clinicians.



**What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care** evaluate a variety of interventions focused on children and young people's wellbeing; however, at the time of contacting them they had not evaluated any intervention focused on online safety

On the following pages, we have spotlighted three interventions/resources to demonstrate the range of what is available:



**Childnet** – this gives an example of what is available for free from one of the main UK children's online safety charities



**Parentzone** – this gives an example of a paid training course targeted at parents and families specifically



**Power of Zero** – while this is US-based, we have included a spotlight on this as it is the only intervention we found with an academic evaluation

---



## Intervention Spotlight: [Childnet Step Up, Speak Up!](#)

xi

### Step Up, Speak Up!

Resources, guidance and information for professionals to raise awareness of online sexual harassment amongst young people aged 13-17 years and to increase reporting.

[Childnet](#) provides a library of materials/interventions available on various types of online harm for a wide range of age groups. The 11-14-year-old age group has the longest list of interventions catalogued as relevant to them. As for other age groups, many of the materials are focused on prevention and mitigation through resilience.

Overall, there is a particular focus on bullying, sexual harassment, sexting and other sexual content in the materials for this age group. There is also focus on promoting "good online citizenship" with materials like "Talk it over".

**Step Up, Speak Up!** is a set of resources, guidance and information on Childnet for professionals to raise awareness of online sexual harassment amongst young people aged 13-17 years, with a focus on increasing reporting. This toolkit specifically focuses on peer-to-peer online sexual harassment taking place between young people. The Teaching Toolkit included in the resources is an interactive and scenario-based resource to help address the topic. Other materials included in the toolkit include, lesson plans, assembly presentations, peer led workshop plans, films, posters, and a quiz.

The materials are free and are designed to be delivered by teachers and school staff. No expert delivery partner is involved.

### Key Points

-  **Free**
-  **Focuses on online sexual harassment**
-  **For teachers**
-  **Aims to raise awareness and increase reporting**
-  **Self-directed**

---

<sup>xi</sup> Image taken from [Childnet website](#).



## Intervention Spotlight: [ParentZone Resilient Families](#)



**Resilient Families** is a set of interactive, video-based lessons that explore digital spaces and relationships for primary (7-11 years old) and secondary aged (11+ years old) children and young people run by [ParentZone](#). A supporting adult course helps parents feel more confident in how to support their child, with ways to spot or deal with problems. The programme takes a resilience-based approach to online safety, explaining how to understand your digital world and what to do if there is a problem. It is designed to be delivered as part of a Computing or RSE curriculum and provides a teaching guide as well as teaching materials including videos.

The programme can help a family or community understand online risks, know how to respond, learn from experiences and to find ways to recover if something bad happens. It focuses on teaching about disinformation, digital literacy, spotting online risks, and understanding how to respond.

The programme costs £200 for 12 months access to resources. This includes some light-touch support but not a delivery partner. The course is available for the whole school/organisation and can be shared with all parents and children the school/organisation supports.

### Key Points

-  £200 for 12 months
-  Focuses on disinformation, digital literacy, spotting and responding to online risks
-  For teachers and parents/carers
-  Aims to increase resilience
-  Self-directed with some support



## Intervention Spotlight: [No Bully](#)



No Bully is an award-winning programme by [Power of Zero](#), a UK charity working to ensure the wellbeing of children in the online world. The No Bully programme has been found to solve close to 90% of bullying and cyberbullying incidents. The intervention involves training teachers and school safeguarding staff in a new way of dealing with bullying and cyberbullying incidents.

When bullying or cyberbullying incidents occur, a member of staff leads a group of children through solution-focused meetings that aim to activate their sense of empathy. The intervention therefore supports children and young people at the point at which bullying/cyberbullying is occurring as well as building a better school culture based on empathy and inclusivity. By training teachers and school safeguarding staff, the intervention promotes long-term, sustainable change.

The No Bully programme has so far been trialled across the U.S.. An evaluation of the intervention published in the Contemporary School Psychology Journal in 2019 found that the intervention reduced the frequency and intensity of bullying in 88% and 87% of cases respectively.<sup>12</sup>

### Key Points



**Cost not stated**



**Focuses on cyberbullying/ bullying**



**For teachers/school staff**



**Aims to activate students' empathy in bullying situations and increase support-seeking behaviour**



**Expert-delivered**



**Academic evaluation**

---

## Research Question #6: What are the barriers to implementing an intervention in schools in West Yorkshire; what are criteria for success?

**Barriers to seeking support at school:** When asked about reasons why they had sought support in the past, two young people responding to our survey cited nervousness and shame as barriers to seeking support. Others in the qualitative research expressed feelings that taking action wouldn't be effective in resolving the issue, and that they wouldn't be understood. Young people also expressed concerns about social norms around keeping quiet and the pressure to not become labelled a "snitch", as well as concerns that they felt telling a teacher meant that the situation would be taken out of their hands and they would lose control over what would happen next. Building on these concerns around young people's trust in teachers, two professionals we spoke to in Stage 1 reported that they felt an intervention would be more likely to be successful if delivered by someone external to the young people's school.

*"Don't tell. 'Cause they'll call your parents and something bad will happen."*

*"You get some teachers, you're gonna tell them and the next day you're gonna feel safe and talk to them, talk to them, they're gonna gather all the information and then tell your parents, and they might switch what you said. And when you try to defend yourself, obviously your friends might not believe you cause your teacher came up to me saying you're doing this you're doing that."*

**Confidence in adults around young people to deal with incidents of online harms:** 71% of professionals who responded to this question in our online survey said they felt that parents/carers don't know enough about what their children do online to keep them safe. While a few parents and carers responding to our survey expressed concern that teachers don't have enough time to adequately deal with online harms, 57% felt that at least some teachers *do* do enough to help keep young people safe online. Despite this, however, out of eight parents/carers who said they had involved a teacher in responding to an incident of harmful content/contact, five felt that the teacher had not been well-equipped to deal with it. When asked about whether police had been well-equipped to deal with instances of online harms, parents/carers were split in their answers.

**Principles of an effective intervention:** Based on all of our learnings from the qualitative and quantitative research in Stages 1 and 2, and our desk research on what currently exists and what is important for success in interventions in other areas of children and young people's wellbeing, we developed some principles for a successful online safety intervention, and tested these with a group of young people aged 18-24 and a group of professionals. We have listed these on the next page, in order of importance as rated by the focus group participants, with supporting evidence for each principle.

Both young people and professionals felt that all principles listed on the previous page would be useful in a successful intervention, but that the most important principles to focus on were building trusting relationships and building young people's self-esteem.

## Finding

1. **Low self-esteem** was the most frequently reported impact of online harms in our research, and some professionals feel this is overlooked
2. Young people reported **not feeling able or willing to go to teachers** about online harm incidents
3. Most survey respondents who had experienced online bullying and harassment **knew the perpetrator in real-life.**
4. We heard from young people that **hierarchical approaches** to dealing with online harms from adults around them were unhelpful.
5. All online harms we explored had **strong offline links.** We also found young people often did not identify when they were targets of online harm
6. Young people reported significant **social pressure to not report incidents** of online harm

## 1. Intervention Design Principle

1. The intervention should **build young people's self-esteem**, and educate young people, teachers, parents and carers on how unrealistic standards online affect self-esteem
2. The intervention should **build trusting relationships** between young people and adults in the school
3. The intervention should **improve peer-to-peer relationships** and behaviour
4. The intervention should be **collaborative and solutions-focused** and not rigid or hierarchical in its approach
5. The intervention should encourage adults and young people to treat **online harms as just as dangerous and harmful as offline**, and enable better understanding of the overlaps between the two
6. The intervention should address cultural change needed to encourage **greater reporting** of online harms incidents

---

## Possible intervention ideas

In addition to these intervention principles, we tested three example ideas for possible interventions with the young people and professionals. These ideas are not fully formed intervention designs, but rather examples of different approaches to tackle online harms in West Yorkshire that we tested with young people and professionals. The first two are examples of changes that could be made to the school system that improve how online harms incidences in general are addressed within schools, and the last is an example of how an intervention could hone in on a particular type of online harm and behaviour:

1. Employing a specific pastoral support worker in schools who is trained in online harms
2. Developing cross-West Yorkshire guidance for schools on how to address and respond to online harms
3. Developing a new, targeted bullying/cyberbullying intervention

These are listed in order of which was rated as most helpful and feasible by young people and professionals. The following pages give more detail on the evidence behind, idea outline and expected outcomes of each example, with feedback from focus groups integrated into these overviews. The three approaches are not mutually exclusive and could be combined; some professionals noted that they would ideally want a mix of all models, with each being tested and evaluated. It should also be noted that some felt schools may be reluctant to engage with any intervention and would prefer to take their own approach, even if models were well evaluated.

---

---

## Example idea 1: Have someone trained in online harms who delivers pastoral support in schools – TOP CHOICE for young people and professionals

**Evidence:** From our qualitative and quantitative research we learned that:

- Young people don't feel able to go to teachers about online harm incidents
  - Most young people who responded to our survey question about who they would go to in the case of an online harm incident did not select their teacher
- Teachers are often perceived by young people to not have time and/or teachers themselves don't feel they have time to deal with online harms incidents
- Teachers & other professionals are perceived by young people to have a relatively poor understanding of online platforms

**Idea:** We proposed to the focus groups an idea of having a separate pastoral worker in the school who is specially trained on online harms. This person would have an understanding of the different platforms and how they work, know how to get content taken down if possible, and would be able to provide emotional support to the young person. This would be a blame-free, safe space allowing young people to go to someone separate from their teachers.

**Expected outcome:** Young people felt that this would encourage better online citizenship, and hoped that this would alleviate pressure on teachers. Professionals felt that this would help young people have greater confidence in school support. We would also hope that an intervention such as this would make teachers feel more supported in dealing with online harms incidents, as they would have a specialist member of staff to refer cases to.

**Success criteria:** Focus groups highlighted the importance of having this pastoral worker separate from the teaching staff and from other pastoral teams as key to building trust with young people. Both groups also felt it was important that this member of staff would have authority to act, as well as good links with external services they could refer young people to. Finally, further role definition and training development should be co-produced with young people.



**Helpfulness score:**<sup>xiii</sup> **High** (Young people – 2.7/3; Professionals – 3.8/4)



**Feasibility score:**<sup>xiv</sup> **Low** (Professionals – 1.3/4)



**Cost estimate:** **High**

---

<sup>xiii</sup> Helpfulness and feasibility scores are calculated automatically by the online polling software used: focus group participants were asked to rank the options in order of how helpful or feasible they thought the options would be, and scores are then calculated based on the average ranking for each item, so that a higher score indicates a higher ranking position and a lower score a lower position. Professionals were given one extra option (“commissioning an evaluation of interventions and resources”) to rank.

<sup>xiv</sup> In the professionals focus group, we asked about how feasible they felt the different options would be as well as how helpful.

---

## Example idea 2: Cross-West Yorkshire school guidance on how to deal with online harm incidents

**Evidence:** From our qualitative and quantitative research, we learned that:

- There is no standardised school response to incidents of online harm in West Yorkshire
- Young people fear that teachers won't take incidents of online harm seriously enough
- At the same time, there is a fear among young people that cases will be escalated and taken out of their hands
- All online harms explored have a strong offline link, yet there is still much conceptualisation and treatment of the online world as separate from and less important than offline issues
- Many resources for teachers, parents/carers and young people exist, but these are generally not well-known about

**Idea:** A standardised guidance document co-produced with young people could provide additional information about some common types of online harms and guidance on what actions to take to support young people experiencing these harms, as well as signposting to additional services. This document could form part of the West Yorkshire Online Safety Bill that is being explored by the Adversity, Trauma and Resilience Network.

**Impact:** This would lead to a more standardised response to online harm incidents across West Yorkshire schools, whereby teachers would feel more supported and educated on how to respond, and young people would feel more supported by the response given. When testing this idea with focus groups, both young people and professionals felt this would help schools gain a shared understanding of online harms, and improve accountability.

**Success criteria:** Both young people and professionals highlighted the importance of this guidance being co-produced with young people; young people suggested that it includes examples of their experiences. Professionals highlighted the need to generate buy-in from schools, which could potentially be achieved through getting schools involved in the development of this guidance. Professionals also suggested evaluating a pilot of this guidance before a full roll-out.



**Helpfulness score:** **Low-Medium** (Young people – 1.1/3; Professionals – 2.5/4)



**Feasibility score:** **High** (Professionals – 3.3/4)



**Cost estimate:** **Low**

### Example idea 3: A new, targeted approach to intervening in cases of online bullying

**Evidence:** From our qualitative and quantitative research, we learned that:

- Young people are taught about cyberbullying, yet it is still very prevalent and harmful
- Young people don't always recognise bullying and harassment behaviours as such when they happen online
- Young people are reluctant to report cases of online bullying and harassment due to social norms and lack of belief that their school would help if they did report this
- Young people often experience online and offline bullying at the same time
- Bullying most often happens peer-to-peer

**Idea:** An intervention could be co-produced with young people and focus on peer-to-peer relationships and behaviour with the aim of reducing cyberbullying and harassment, and improving young people's understanding of this issue. The intervention would include training for both young people and school staff, and would empower young people to act when encountering online bullying or harassment.

**Expected outcome:** If successful, this intervention would first lead to an increase in reported cyberbullying and harassment, as young people are better able to identify when this is happening and feel more able to report. However, over time this intervention would aim to reduce incidences. This intervention would mean young people feel more empowered and that they feel supported by the adults around them in dealing with cases of online bullying and harassment.

**Success criteria:** In order to succeed, both focus groups felt that young people would need to be involved in the development of this intervention. Professionals highlighted that co-production would increase buy-in from young people and support a more in-depth understanding of their needs. Both groups also felt that supporting perpetrators of bullying behaviour was important. Young people expressed concerns around the difficulty of changing culture around reporting, and professionals highlighted the importance of having links to external agencies who could provide further support to young people.



**Helpfulness score:** **Medium** (Young people – 2.1/3; Professionals – 1.5/4)



**Feasibility score:** **Low** (Professionals – 1.5/4)



**Cost estimate:** **Medium**

---

# Final Recommendations

There is an exciting opportunity for the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit to be national leaders and work proactively together with schools and local communities across the county to tackle online harms, and respond to the very real need to better support young people to use online platforms safely. Our research has identified a clear gap in evidence-based, evaluated, education-based interventions addressing online harms, and a lack of standardised responses to online harms incidences across West Yorkshire schools.

In order to lead an innovative approach in this area which has potential for national scale, we recommend that the West Yorkshire VRU takes an approach that integrates the following points:

**Online harms as a Public Health concern:** online harms amongst children and young people needs to be identified as a public health concern that is inextricably linked to wider challenges such as adversity and trauma, mental health, youth violence and misogyny and thus should be included in prevention and reduction strategies for each of these issues.

**Overcoming the binary distinction of online and offline:** Online harms need to be acknowledged as having the capacity to be just as – and in some cases more – harmful as offline harms, and moving away from a binary distinction of the two is necessary to truly understand young people's experiences.

**Co-production with children and young people:** The design, development and implementation of any future intervention or resource needs to be trauma-informed and involve children and young people – and where possible professionals and parents and carers also.

**Harm reduction and mitigation:** The VRU should take an approach towards addressing online harms that focuses primarily on harm reduction and mitigation rather than on the prevention of online harms experiences. While ways to prevent harmful experiences from occurring in the first place should be considered as part of any intervention that the VRU develops, total prevention of these experiences among children and young people is not possible without involvement from tech companies, and smaller-scale attempts to do this without any focus on harm reduction and mitigation can have unintended negative consequences. For example, advising young people to delete an app when they have experienced harm on this app, without any other support offered to the young person can lead to young people becoming disengaged and less likely to report future incidents.

**Maximising the benefits of social media:** The VRU should take an approach that recognises the many benefits that social media has for young people, which is likely particularly important for young people who are more isolated offline, and that aims to challenge internalised norms among young people, educate them on how to recognise when they are being targeted online, and ultimately enable them to use social media in a way that maximises benefits whilst minimising harm.

**Peer-to-peer relationships and behaviour:** It is necessary to consider how to address peer-to-peer relationships and behaviour as a key focus in any intervention, given the prevalence and high impact of cyberbullying and harassment behaviours among young people in West Yorkshire.

**Evaluation and learning:** The VRU should build in evaluation of any intervention from the beginning, including a role for a Strategic Learning Partner. This will enable agile development and iteration of an intervention as it is developed and implemented, increase

---

the potential for national acceleration of any intervention after a pilot in West Yorkshire, and enable West Yorkshire to play a key role in building up the evidence base of what works in this area.

**Early intervention:** The VRU should consider implementing an online harms intervention from a young age – professionals who took part in this research recommended as young as 8, and evidence indicates the age at which children get their first smartphone is getting younger and younger, with most 8-11-year-olds now owning their own.<sup>13</sup>

**Supporting teachers:** Adequate training, resources and support for teachers needs to be included in any school-based intervention developed.

**Combining elements of example ideas:** The VRU should explore the potential for including elements of all three example intervention ideas presented in this report in a possible intervention. For example, an intervention to address bullying/cyberbullying could include sharing guidance with all schools across West Yorkshire, but piloting a full intervention in just a few. The example ideas given in this report are intended as starting points and any intervention that is commissioned should be based on further co-design and co-production with a wider group of young people and professionals across West Yorkshire.

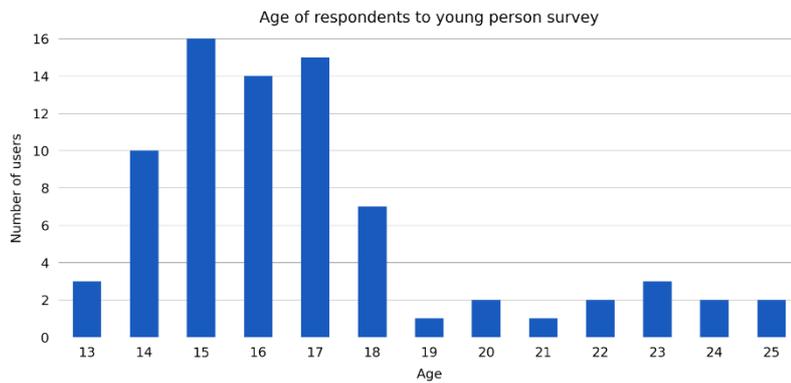
**Increased incident rates in the short-term:** Any intervention should aim to increase the number of online harm incidents that are reported in the short-term as young people become better able to identify when they are being targeted and gain confidence and trust in seeking support, while aiming for a decrease in incident rates in the longer-term.

By following these recommendations and building on the findings laid out in this report, we believe West Yorkshire has a unique opportunity to change the way that online harms among children and young people are conceptualised, understood, and addressed both regionally and nationally.

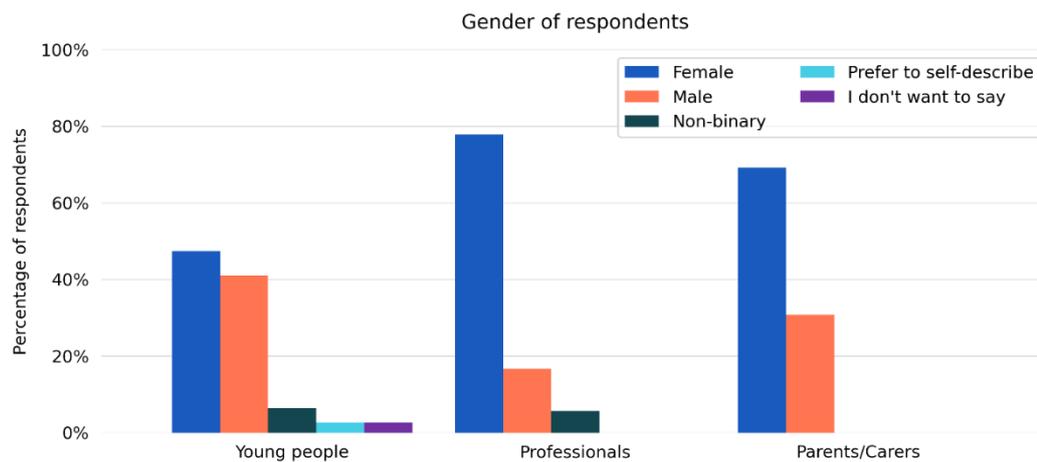
---

# Appendix: Survey demographics

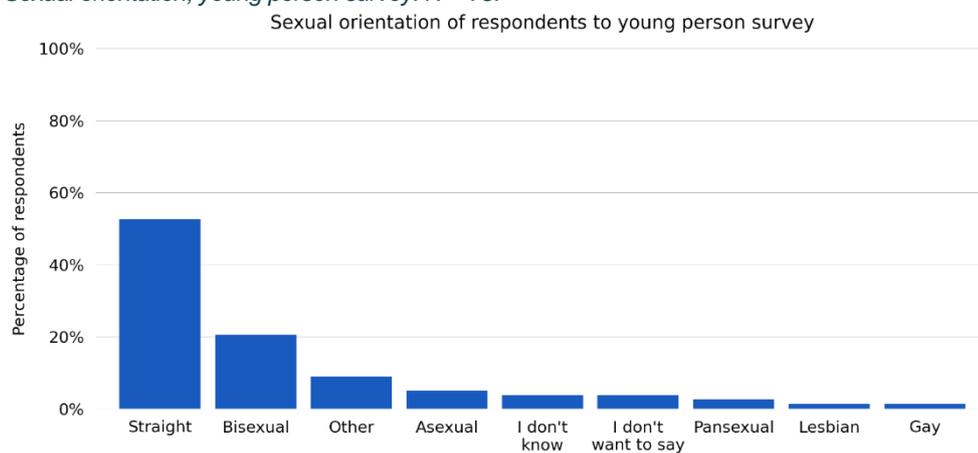
Age, young person survey. N=78



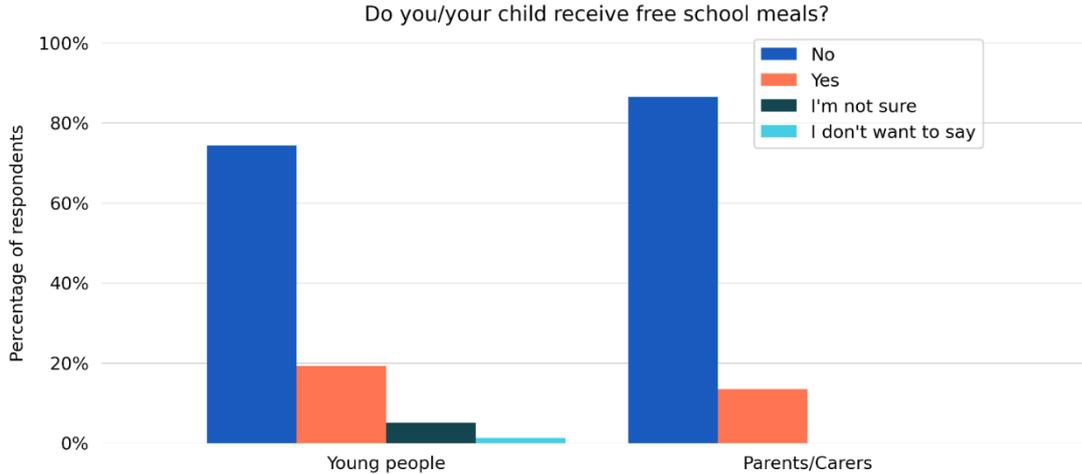
Gender. Young person survey, N=78. Professional survey, N=18. Parents/carers survey N=52.



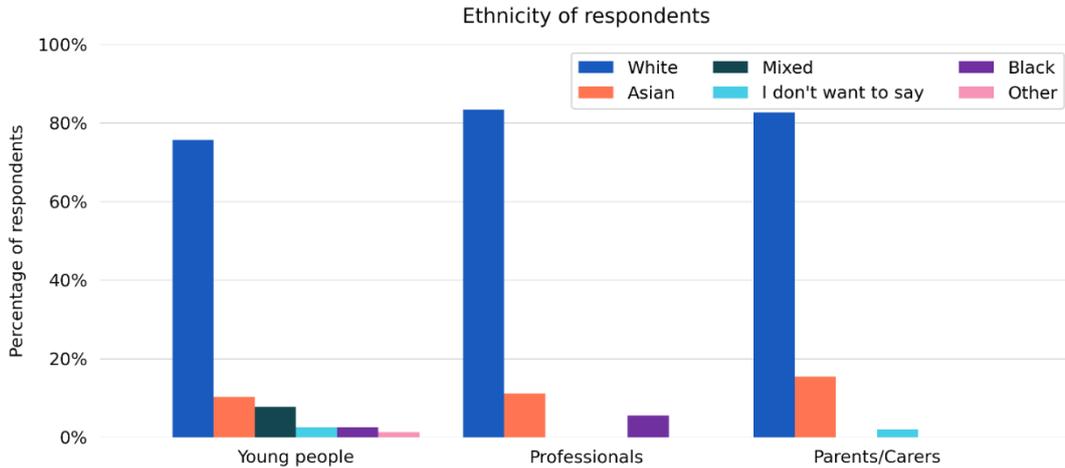
Sexual orientation, young person survey. N = 78.



Free school meals. Young person survey, N=78. Parents/carers survey, N=52.



Ethnicity. Young person survey, N=78. Professional survey, N=18. Parents/carers survey N=52.



Detailed ethnicity breakdown:

### Young person survey

- White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British 72%
- Other White background 4%
- Indian 5%
- Pakistani 1%
- Other Asian background 1%
- Chinese 1%
- African 3%
- White and Asian 4%
- White and Black Caribbean 3%
- White and Black African 1%
- Arab 1%

### Professional survey

- White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British 72%
- Other White background 11%

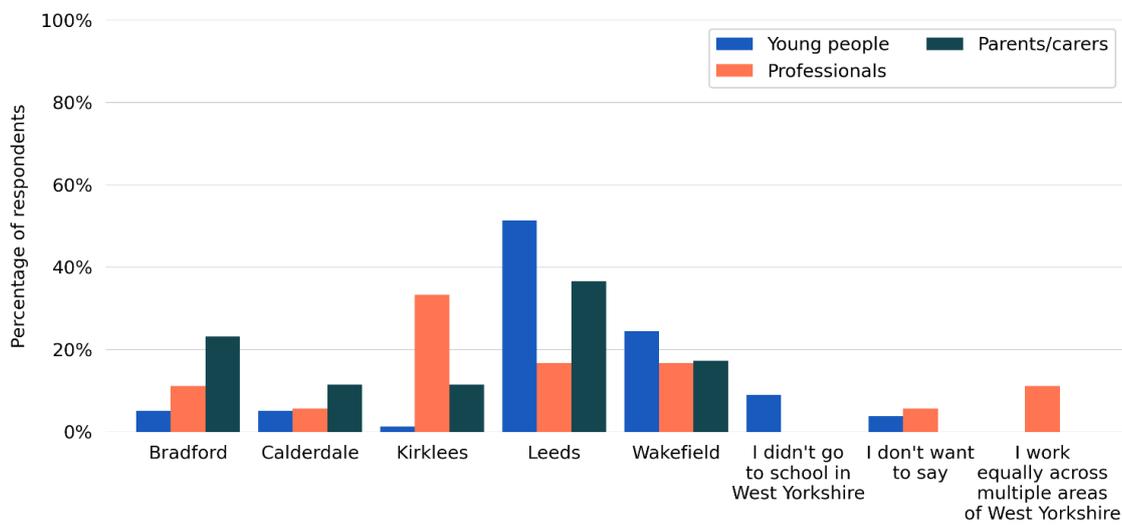
- Indian 6%
- Pakistani 6%
- Black Caribbean 6%

**Parent/carer survey**

- White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British 71%
- Other White background 10%
- Irish 2%
- Other Asian background 6%
- Indian 4%
- Bangladeshi 4%
- Pakistani 2%

Connection to area. Young person survey, N = 78. Professional survey, N = 18. Parents/carer survey N = 52.

Connection to area



---

## References

- <sup>1</sup> See for example Catch22 (2017), 'Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence', <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/social-media-as-a-catalyst-and-trigger-for-youth-violence/>; Lau (2017), 'Effects of social media usage and social media multitasking on the academic performance of university students', <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563216307841>, and Haidt (2022), Teen Mental Health is Plummeting, and Social Media is a Major Contributing Cause, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Haidt%20Testimony.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> See for example New York Times (2020), 'It's Life or Death': The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html?smid=em-share> and Twenge et al (2021), Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness,
- <sup>3</sup> See for example New York Times (2020), 'It's Life or Death': The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html?smid=em-share> and Twenge et al (2021), Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140197121000853>
- <sup>4</sup> Haidt (2022), Teen Mental Health is Plummeting, and Social Media is a Major Contributing Cause, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Haidt%20Testimony.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> See for example <https://www.news-medical.net/health/The-Impact-of-Cyberbullying-on-Mental-Health.aspx#:~:text=Rates%20of%20stress%2C%20depression%2C%20and,and%2016%25%20were%20severely%20depressed>
- <sup>6</sup> See for example Ofcom (2018), Addressing Harmful Online Content: A perspective from broadcasting and on-demand standards regulation, [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/120991/Addressing-harmful-online-content.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0022/120991/Addressing-harmful-online-content.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> Internet Matters (2023), Year 2 Index Report <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Internet-Matters-Childrens-Wellbeing-in-a-Digital-World-Index-report-2023-2.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> Orth & Robins (2014), 'The Development of Self Esteem', <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414547414>
- <sup>9</sup> McInroy & Craig (2019), "'It's Like a Safe Haven Fantasy World": Online Fandom Communities and the Identity Development Activities of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth', <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000234>
- <sup>10</sup> Internet Matters (2023), Year 2 Index Report <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Internet-Matters-Childrens-Wellbeing-in-a-Digital-World-Index-report-2023-2.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> Wakefield Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (2022), School Health Survey 2022, <http://www.wakefieldjsna.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/School-Health-Survey-2022-Headline-Findings-compressed.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> DeNike & Gordon (2019), 'Solution Team: Outcomes of a Target-Centered Approach to Resolving School Bullying', <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40688-019-00234-3>
- <sup>13</sup> Internet Matters (2023), Year 2 Index Report, <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Internet-Matters-Childrens-Wellbeing-in-a-Digital-World-Index-report-2023-2.pdf>



Social Finance Ltd  
87 Vauxhall Walk  
London  
SE11 5HJ

—

+44 (0) 20 7770 6836

[socialfinance.org.uk](https://socialfinance.org.uk)

Publication date: March 2023

#### Disclaimer and Terms of Use

This report is not an offering of any Notes for Sale and is provided by Social Finance solely for information purposes. Neither Social Finance nor any of their respective affiliates, directors, officers, employees or agents makes any express or implied representation, warranty or undertaking with respect to this Document, and none of them accepts any responsibility or liability as to its accuracy or completeness. Social Finance has not assumed any responsibility for independent verification of the information contained herein or otherwise made available in connection to the Document. The text in this Document may be reproduced free of charge providing that it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Social Finance copyright and the title of the document be specified.

Social Finance is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority FCA No: 497568