Professionals Online Safety Helpline Analysis 2024

2024

Exploring the Issues Professionals Face in Tackling Online Harms

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SWGfL
Safe, Secure, Online

UK Safer Internet Centre

Professionals Online Safety Helpline

NOMINET

Executive Summary

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) continues to serve as a critical resource for professionals working with children and young people, offering support on a range of online safety issues. This 2023-24 casebook analysis, based on 2,219 recorded cases, highlights the evolving challenges faced by schools and professionals in managing online harms, particularly in relation to cyberbullying, online impersonation, reputational damage, and unauthorised use of school branding.

KEY FINDINGS:

Online reputation concerns were the most frequently reported issue (1,717 cases), followed by bullying (1,515 cases) and impersonation (158 cases).

76% of cases were linked to TikTok, highlighting the platform's prominence in online safety reports submitted to the helpline.

Schools and professionals continue to struggle with what they perceive to be social media platforms' slow response times and inconsistent enforcement of their own guidelines, leading to frustration and repeated escalation.

The helpline plays an essential role in content takedown efforts, reporting 4,064 URLs across various platforms, with an impressive 94.2% removal rate.

TRENDS AND CHALLENGES:

The broad categorisation of "bullying" in disclosures incorporates harassment, defamation, coercion, and even criminal activities such as blackmail and sextortion. Additionally, the rise in fake accounts impersonating schools, staff, and students continues to be a growing issue, often used to spread misinformation or ridicule individuals. Public shaming, doxxing, and false allegations are also significant challenges, with many professionals feeling powerless in addressing these incidents due to what they perceive to be inconsistent enforcement by social media platforms.

THE ROLE OF POSH:

Despite these challenges, POSH has proven to be an invaluable intermediary between schools and social media companies, leveraging its direct industry contacts to escalate cases and improve content removal success rates. Professionals report that attempts to contact platforms independently are often unsuccessful, with the helpline achieving far better outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Strengthening digital safeguarding policies within schools to better prepare for emerging online threats.

- Enhancing training and awareness programs for educators on online safety and reporting mechanisms.

- Advocating for improved accountability from social media platforms to ensure timely action on harmful content.

- Encouraging a proactive rather than reactive approach to digital safety, including better monitoring of school-related content online.

The 2023-24 analysis reinforces the growing need for POSH as an essential support system for professionals navigating online harms. Moving forward, ensuring greater collaboration between schools, social media platforms, and regulatory bodies will be crucial in addressing these complex and persistent challenges.

Introduction

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline1 is a free-of-charge support service for professionals and volunteers working with children and young people. It provides signposting, advice and mediation to resolve online safety issues staff face about themselves, such as protecting professional identity and online harassment, or problems affecting young people they work with, for example cyberbullying or sexting issues.

The helpline is open Monday to Friday, during normal working hours, and they aim to respond to calls within 3 hours where possible. The helpline has exceptional contacts with industry partners, which enables them to report issues to a real person, and for platforms to keep helpline practitioners up
to date with their policies and tools for reporting content.

The helpline has been in operation for 13 years and during this time, has handled over 30,000 contacts, providing vital support to professionals in schools, colleges and across the wider children's workforce. As part of the
UK Safer Internet Centre, the helpline is managed and operated by South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL).

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the helpline between 2023 and 2024 is drawn from the cases recorded over a year and draws both quantitative and qualitative data to explore how the service is used and the nature of enquiries. Included in this analysis are:

- Volume of calls

- Nature of calls

- Location and profession supported

- A deep dive into the nature of the most common enquiries and the frustrations of professionals working to resolve online safety issues.

The analysis is based upon 2,219 cases taken between 01/09/2023 and 31/08/2024.

The case recording system captures the complete dialogue of each enquiry. The majority (94%) of enquiries are received through online channels, including the Professionals Online Safety Helpline website and email. However, a smaller portion (6%) of cases are handled via phone, with practitioners documenting these discussions. In some instances, a practitioner may also call an enquirer who initially reached out through online tools.

During interactions between practitioners and enquirers, key details such as location and profession are typically recorded. Additionally, practitioners classify enquiries based on various incident types, a categorisation system developed from the helpline's experience. The categorisation remains a valuable tool for identifying common enquiry themes and the areas where professionals require the most support.

TOP LEVEL ANALYSIS

The first part of this report explores quantitative data related to the helpline use and nature of enquiries. We can see that the service is used, in the majority, by education professionals in England. However, the service has a reach across the UK and is available to, and used by a wide range of professionals working with young people. In Table 1 we have a breakdown of the location of enquirers, and Table 2 provides a little more context in terms of the top five counties in England who use the service. However, it is worth reiterating that the service is used across the country.
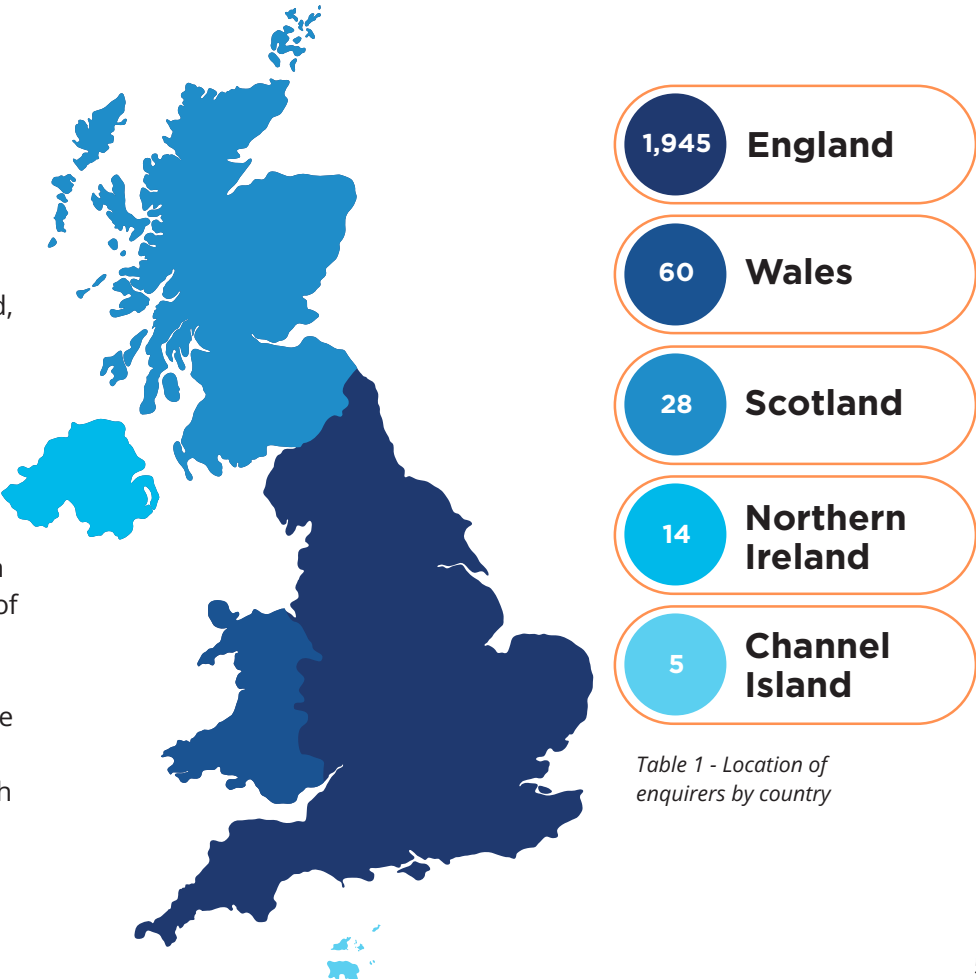

1,945	**England**
60	**Wales**
28	**Scotland**
14	**Northern Ireland**
5	**Channel Island**

Table 1 - Location of enquirers by country

Enquiries come from across the UK as a whole, with the most coming from the following counties.

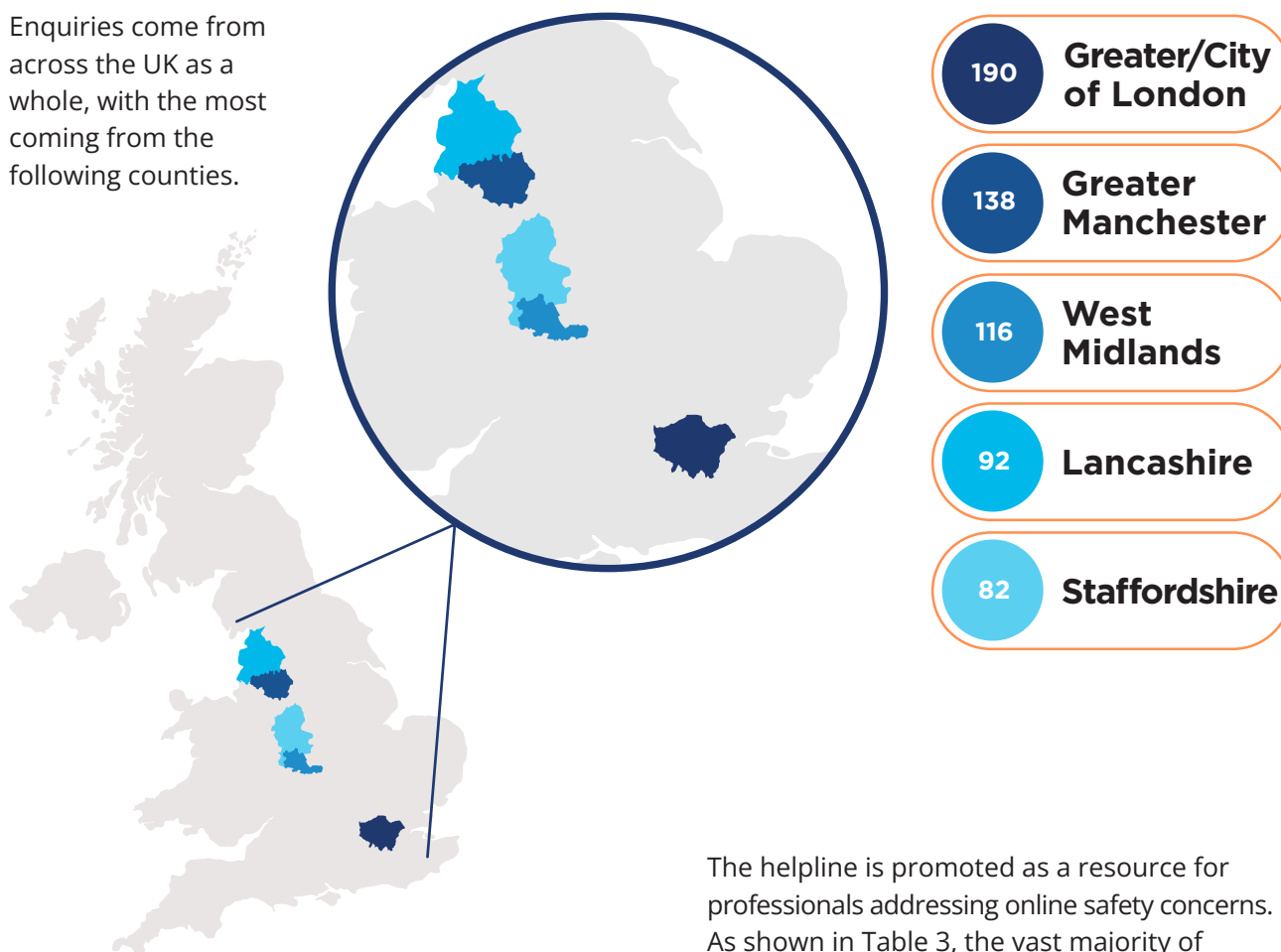|	
190	**Greater/City of London**
138	**Greater Manchester**
116	**West Midlands**
92	**Lancashire**
82	**Staffordshire**

Table 2 - Top five counties

The helpline is promoted as a resource for professionals addressing online safety concerns. As shown in Table 3, the vast majority of enquiries come from teachers and those working within education (for example senior leaders in school settings). However, a broad range of other professionals also seek guidance and support. For instance, enquiries from charity workers or local authority staff can also involve professionals working within schools or social care settings.

This year, a small number of cases came directly from young people. While helpline practitioners provide initial guidance, they also refer these individuals to other services, such as Childline, for further support. A similar approach is taken when assisting parents, as the primary focus of the POSH service is to support professionals. However, the helpline will not ignore an enquiry and will always signpost someone out of scope to a more appropriate service.

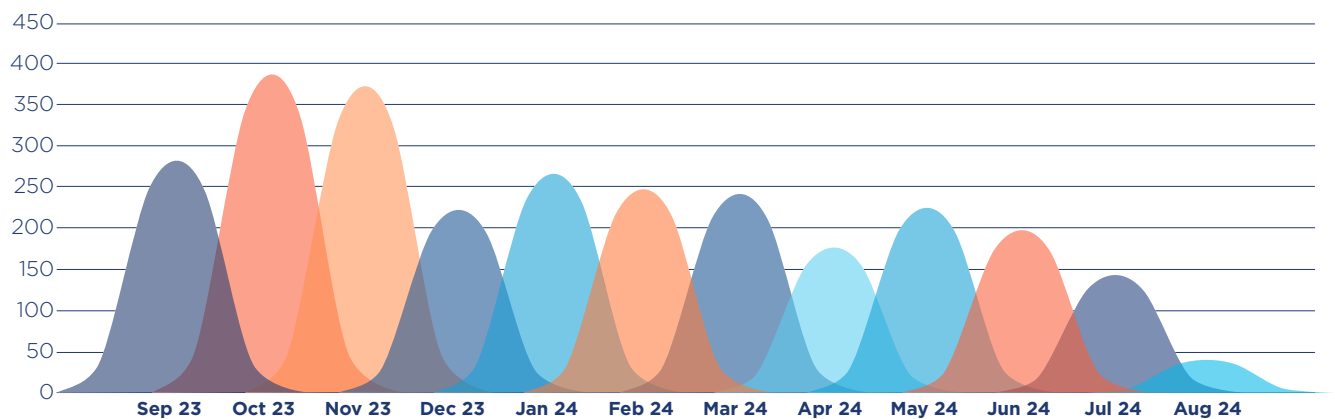| Education	Care	Health care	Local Authority	Social Care	NGO
2025	10	8	6	6	5

Table 3 – Type of enquirer

Figure 1 - Monthly breakdown of enquiries to POSH

Figure 1 shows the volume of enquiries to the helpline per month over the evaluation period. As is typical, activity is generally busier during term time, which is unsurprising given the source of most enquiries. It differs from last years analysis in that the busier period was in the Autumn Term, but it is possible last year was an outlier because of high profile media around "TikTok riots" during the Spring Term of academic year 2022-23.

When we consider the nature of the enquiries that the helpline supports, we can see a broad breakdown in the following 'Top Issues' table. Given that enquiries can receive more than one category (reflecting the complexity of many of the calls the helpline receives), the cumulative number of these issues is larger than the total number of enquiries received.

TOP ISSUES	
ONLINE REPUTATION	1,717
BULLYING	1,515
IMPERSONATION	158
SHARING OF NUDES	47
HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR	45
OTHER	34
UNDERAGE USE	27

1,555	TikTok
149	Instagram
129	Snapchat
94	Facebook
18	WhatsApp
15	YouTube
15	X

Table 4 - Social media platforms hosting concerning content reported to POSH

The "Other" category is used for enquiries such as general advice and guidance, signposting to resources, other services and out of scope requests.

The recorder of an enquiry will also record the social media platform (if appropriate) that hosts the issue about which they are contacting POSH. We can see from the data in Table 4 that TikTok is now, by far, the most widely reported platform with almost 75% of calls related to content hosted there.

Cases are also broken down to detail more specifically the nature of the concern or abuse being reported, which is detailed in Table 5. Again, this clearly illustrates that the predominant issue relates to concerns about school reputation (for example, abuse of a teacher or school practice online, or the creation of fake school accounts that are used to post abusive content), but peer to peer bullying is also a significant issue. Again, this breakdown is a useful illustration of the broad range of issues professionals face, and the helpline supports.

ONLINE REPUTATION OF THE SCHOOL	1,396	LEGITIMATE IMPERSONATION OF SCHOOL	48
PEER TO PEER BULLYING	1,125	RACISM	40
SCHOOL LOGO	974	HOMOPHOBIA OR TRANSPHOBIA	31
ONLINE REPUTATION OF PROFESSIONAL	654	CHILD ON CHILD VIOLENCE	31
STUDENT TO TEACHER BULLYING	524	CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION	22
STUDENTS UNDER 13	169	SUICIDE/SELF-HARM CONTENT	14
IMPERSONATION OF PROFESSIONAL	131	PORNOGRAPHIC CONTENT	14
SEXUAL HARASSMENT	101	MISOGYNY	12
CRITICISMS/ALLEGATIONS	92	VIOLENT CONTENT	8
IMPERSONATIONS OF CHILD	61	DANGEROUS/HARMFUL CHALLENGES	6

Table 5 - Nature of enquiries received by the helpline

And finally, in Table 6 we can see a breakdown related to whom that abuse is directed. Again this helps to illustrate the volume of abuse that relates to professionals, but there are also considerable concerns related to abuse of young people.
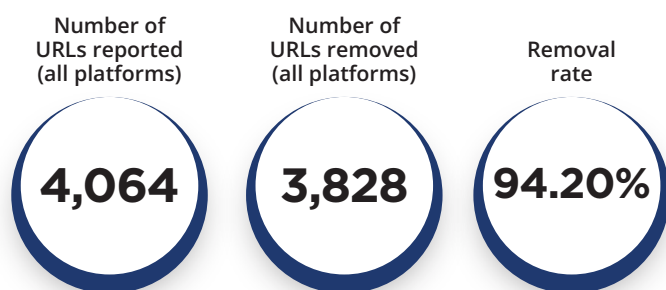
Both child and professional
1,120

Child or young person
523

Professional
358

Table 6 - Pertaining to

A further illustration of the prevalence of concerns around TikTok can be shown using a word cloud to capture the most prevalent terms in the subject lines of email-based enquiries sent to the helpline. This is captured in Figure 2:

Figure 2 - Nature of enquiry subjects 2024

As we can see from the word frequency breakdown in Table 7 below, "TikTok" and "account" are now so much more frequent than any other term, it is useful to remove them from the analysis to have a better illustration of the other terms. We have illustrated this in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3 - Word cloud of enquiry subjects, TikTok removed.

From this illustration, we can see that the next most pressing issues are content removal and matters relating to the school.

1,540	TIKTOK	66	PLEASE
1,349	ACCOUNT	65	SNAPCHAT
257	SCHOOL	60	VIDEO
236	REMOVAL	60	CONTENT
112	INSTAGRAM	58	ONLINE
101	REQUEST	56	STAFF
88	REPORT	56	REPORTING
84	FAKE	55	ADVICE
82	SUPPORT	54	FACEBOOK
67	REMOVE	51	HELP

Table 7 - Top 20 words in email subject headings

Due to the working relationship that the helpline has with all major platforms, one of the most powerful types of support the helpline can provide is to report concerns directly to platforms to get content analysed, and if community guidelines were breached, taken down. Case descriptions highlighted that in many cases professionals had attempted to contact platforms themselves without much success, and going via the helpline often yields better outcomes. In the cases presented during the reporting period, in total 68.8% of cases were referred to a platform to be considered for take down.

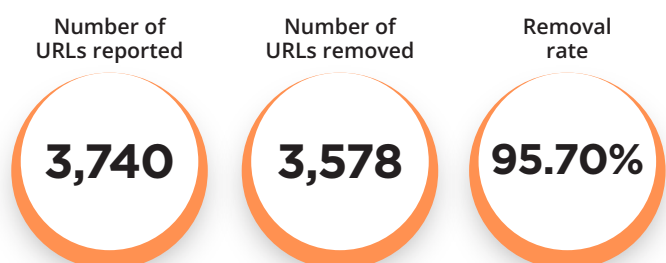This data as a whole highlights the changing challenges schools (given the majority of enquiries come from this sector) face regarding online defamation, impersonation, and reputational harm. With online reputation being the most common issue (1,717 cases) and impersonation affecting both professionals and institutions (158 cases), it is clear that schools are frequently targeted through social media. The widespread misuse of school logos and incidents of student-to-teacher bullying further emphasise the need for greater awareness of these issues and services like the helpline to support resolution. However, we can still also see a high level of peer-to-peer abuse within school communities and a lot of this does become visible online and can have serious impact upon victims.

Number of URLs reported (all platforms)	Number of URLs removed (all platforms)	Removal rate
4,064	3,828	94.20%

TikTok Specific

Number of URLs reported	Number of URLs removed	Removal rate
3,740	3,578	95.70%

Table 8 - Take down statistics

The high removal rate of reported content (94.2%) highlights the importance of the helpline in resolving these issues and how having an intermediary is an effective way of interacting with those hosting this content.

In the next section we take a more detailed exploration of the cases the helpline handles, with a focus on the most significant issues enquirers face.

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENQUIRIES

If we conduct a high level thematic analysis we can see a breakdown of themes that relate to the issues faced by those contacting the helpline. Of course, this tallies with the breakdown of cases described in the statistics above but this analysis provides more detail on the nature of the complaints and the issues faced in (mainly) school settings.

1. ONLINE HARASSMENT AND CYBERBULLYING

Harassment of School Staff and Students

- Requests for the removal of defamatory content about teachers and students.
- Fake accounts using staff or student images without consent.
- Personal attacks on school staff, sometimes racially charged.

Peer-to-Peer Bullying Among Students

- School gossip accounts spreading rumours and misinformation.
- Accounts targeting specific students for ridicule or bullying.

Blackmail and Sextortion

- Cases where individuals are being threatened with the release of sensitive images or videos unless money is paid.
- Content posted on adult sites as a form of revenge or coercion.

2. UNAUTHORISED USE OF IMAGES AND PERSONAL INFORMATION

Impersonation and Fake Accounts

- Fake social media accounts using school names, logos, or staff/student photos.
- Fake LinkedIn profiles impersonating teachers.

Non-consensual Sharing of Personal Content

- Screenshots of student social media accounts shared publicly.
- Use of private photos in offensive or defamatory contexts.

Doxing and Privacy Concerns

- Sharing of personal information about students or staff without permission.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM ABUSE

Content Removal Requests

- Numerous requests to take down TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat accounts violating privacy.
- Reports that platforms are unresponsive or slow in acting.

Inappropriate or Harmful Content

- Videos of physical violence between students posted online.
- Accounts promoting harmful behaviours such as self-harm or cyberstalking.

Underage Users on Social Media

- Concerns around children under 13 creating and managing social media accounts.
- Reports of younger students engaging in online harassment.

4. DIGITAL SAFETY AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

Training and Resources for Schools and Organisations

- Requests for training programs tailored to online safety for students and staff.
- Interest in courses for online safety leads/coordinators in schools.

Online Risks for Vulnerable Adults and Individuals with Learning Disabilities

- Enquiries about guidance on protecting vulnerable adults from exploitation online.
- Concerns over individuals accessing disturbing or harmful content.

5. LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Defamation and Misinformation

- Concerns about false accusations against staff members.
- Cases where fake news and rumours impact schools and workplaces.

Regulatory and Compliance Issues

- Schools inquiring about legal aspects of online monitoring and filtering.
- Questions about data retention policies for internet history in schools.

In exploring this in more detail, we see that "bullying" or "cyberbullying" are often terms used to describe the issues schools face with students and even staff being targeted on social media platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram. Harassment includes offensive posts, edited images designed to ridicule individuals, and malicious comments directed at staff and students. The viral nature of social media intensifies these issues, as harmful content can spread quickly, drawing further engagement from a wider audience. The anonymity provided by social media platforms causes challenges for schools, often making it difficult to trace those responsible and take disciplinary action. Schools are also increasingly concerned about the emotional and mental health toll this takes on victims, with some cases escalating into severe distress or self-isolation.

Schools are also facing challenges in reporting and removing harmful content. Despite repeated efforts to flag incidents, many platforms are slow to take action or fail to acknowledge the severity of the issue. This perceived lack of accountability from social media companies leaves victims and those supporting feeling like they have no recourse, often allowing the harassment to continue unchecked. The impact is particularly severe for teachers who find themselves targeted by students or external individuals, leading to reputational damage, anxiety and concerns over their own personal safety.

Impersonation through fake social media accounts has emerged as a major challenge for schools. These accounts often pose as staff, students, or even the school itself, using misleading information and manipulated images to spread disinformation or defame individuals. Such accounts have been used to share false narratives, mock teachers, or engage in scams by soliciting personal information under false pretences. The difficulty in verifying identities online makes it easy for those wishing to cause trouble and upset to use these platforms for personal vendettas or fraudulent activities. Schools find themselves struggling to identify and report fake accounts, as the burden of proof often lies with the victim, and social media platforms may not act swiftly to remove them. This delay in intervention allows what schools view as damaging content to circulate widely, further amplifying its negative effects on the school community.

Many schools often report students or external individuals misusing their logos, branding, or images of staff and students. Unauthorised use of school insignia can create false associations with content that is inappropriate, or misleading, damaging the school's reputation and in many cases, enquirers view as defamatory. In some cases, social media pages using school branding mislead parents and students into believing they are official school accounts, leading to confusion and misinformation.

There are also privacy concerns regarding the unauthorised sharing of student and staff images. Personal photos, often taken from school newsletters or official websites, have been repurposed in offensive memes or manipulated to spread harmful narratives. Once these images are uploaded to social media, there is concern that controlling their spread becomes nearly impossible, causing distress to those involved.

One of the most frustrating challenges for schools is the inability to get harmful content removed from social media. Many platforms claim to have strict community guidelines, but schools say when they report violations—whether they involve harassment, impersonation, or privacy breaches—responses are often slow, inconsistent, or dismissive. Content that, in their view, clearly violates ethical and legal standards can remain online for weeks or even months, allowing the damage and impact on individuals to continue unchecked.

Finally, despite age restrictions on platforms like TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, many underage students manage to create accounts and engage with content that is not suitable for their age group. There are many concerns around under-aged access such as exposure to inappropriate material, interaction with online predators and increased vulnerability to abuse. Schools often say that they struggle to educate parents on the dangers of underage social media use and will turn to the helpline to try to get accounts removed.

> **The impact is particularly severe for teachers who find themselves targeted.**

IMPLICATIONS FROM THIS ANALYSIS

From this broad analysis we can see several key issues emerge that are worthy of more deep exploration. One of the most significant of those is the use of the term "bullying" for a very broad range of online abuses to both young people and professionals.

Bullying used in the context of these enquiries extends far beyond traditional definitions, encompassing harassment, defamation, impersonation, coercion, and even criminal activities like blackmail and sextortion. The anonymity and permanence of online content make these issues particularly difficult to address.

One of the most pressing concerns is targeted harassment, where students and staff face offensive comments, insults and prolonged online attacks. Teachers are frequently ridiculed for their appearance, teaching style, or disciplinary actions and victims struggle to hold perpetrators accountable as social media platforms are slow to act.

Impersonation is another growing problem. Fake accounts mimic students, staff, or schools, spreading misinformation, offensive content or false accusations. Some students create "baiting accounts" that solicit anonymous gossip, leading to reputational harm, especially for teachers falsely accused of misconduct. Removing these accounts is challenging, as platforms often require direct evidence from the impersonated individual.

Public shaming also causes lasting harm. Students and staff may find their photos or videos shared without consent, sometimes edited to mock them. Fights or humiliating moments are recorded and widely circulated, making it nearly impossible for victims to reclaim control of their digital presence. Even when content is deleted, copies continue to circulate, prolonging the distress.

Doxxing, or the exposure of personal information, is also an issue the helpline supports professionals in resolving. Teachers have been targeted by students posting their private details, exposing them to harassment. Once such information is online, it is nearly impossible to remove, leaving victims vulnerable.

Defamation and false allegations add another layer of harm. Students sometimes fabricate claims against peers or teachers, leading to reputational damage and emotional distress. Even if proven false, the damage is often irreversible as rumours spread rapidly online. Social media platforms are slow to remove such content, frustrating schools that struggle to take action.

Beyond direct attacks, coercion and social manipulation are prevalent, with students pressuring peers into harmful actions or exclusionary behaviour. Discriminatory abuse, including hate speech targeting race, gender, sexual orientation or religion, can add another layer of harm and impact on victims. Schools say that they work to combat this through inclusivity education, but the speed at which harmful content spreads makes intervention challenging.

Some cases can also escalate into more criminal activities such as stalking, where victims are persistently harassed across multiple platforms. This can involve tracking their online activity, tagging them in offensive posts, or sending repeated unwanted messages. The relentless nature of cyberstalking leaves victims anxious and fearful, with few options to escape.

A particularly insidious form of online abuse is gaslighting and psychological manipulation, where perpetrators spread false narratives to make victims doubt their reality. Unlike direct attacks, gaslighting is subtle, difficult to detect, and causes long-term emotional damage. Schools struggle to intervene, as much of this manipulation occurs in private digital spaces.

> **Schools say that they work to combat this through inclusivity education.**

> **The need for effective intervention has never been greater.**

Modern online abuse is far more pervasive than "traditional" bullying, leaving victims with few options for recourse. Social media's anonymity and vast reach allow harmful content to persist, making intervention challenging. Without stronger regulations and better digital safety education, these issues will continue to grow. As online interactions play an increasing role in young people's lives, the need for effective intervention has never been greater.

In conclusion, this analysis reveals that modern online bullying encompasses a wide spectrum of harmful behaviours—ranging from harassment and impersonation to defamation and gaslighting—that extend far beyond traditional definitions. The anonymity and permanence of social media amplify these issues, leaving both students and professionals vulnerable to lasting reputational and emotional damage. The complexity of these abuses again highlights the importance of support services such as the Professionals Online Safety Helpline in helping to resolve these issues.

THRESHOLDS FOR DEFAMATION

One of the issues that arises a great deal in enquiries to the helpline is those that are often referred to by enquirers as 'defamation'. On more detailed examination, some of these cases, while unpleasant, would not meet thresholds for defamation and it is worthwhile to reflect upon the nature of defamation related to these sorts of incidents.

Defamation in the UK is a serious legal issue where false statements can spread rapidly and cause lasting harm. Under the Defamation Act 2013, a statement is defamatory if it is false and causes serious harm to an individual's or organisation's reputation. Businesses must also prove financial loss or its likelihood. Unlike traditional media, where editorial oversight prevents false claims, social media allows anyone to post freely, often without considering legal consequences. A single defamatory post can quickly reach thousands, potentially damaging reputations.

For example, if someone falsely accused a headteacher of financial misconduct on social media, it could be considered defamatory if it led to professional or personal harm. The person making the claim could be held legally accountable, as could those who share or endorse it. While social media platforms are not typically liable for user-generated content (see below), they may be expected to remove harmful posts when notified.

However, certain defences exist. If a statement is true, it is not defamatory, regardless of the damage caused. Similarly, opinions clearly expressed as such, rather than presented as fact, are protected. Statements made in the public interest with responsible reporting may also be defended.

However, reckless or malicious falsehoods that damage reputations are not protected and can result in legal consequences. Those found guilty of defamation may be required to pay damages, issue a public apology, or remove the content. Given the permanence of online content, even deleting a post may not undo the harm caused if it has already been seen by a large audience with the potential to capture and reshare.

Defamation laws apply to both adults and children. A pupil falsely accusing a teacher on social media could be legally responsible, though Police and prosecutors would consider factors such as age, comprehension and intent. While younger children may not fully understand the impact of their words, deliberately harmful statements are taken more seriously.

> **POSH plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between schools and social media platforms.**

For these reasons, unless a case is clearly illegal, there are better potential mitigations other than legal actions or threats of action. The first step is requesting removal, either by contacting those who have posted the content directly (if know) or reporting it to the platform. Involving parents or guardians can often resolve the issue, as many are unaware of their child's online behaviour. However, if a post includes threats, harassment, or false allegations of criminal activity, the issue may escalate beyond school intervention, requiring Police or legal involvement. Schools can also enforce disciplinary measures, including requiring the pupil to delete the post, issue an apology, or in serious cases, face suspension or exclusion.

Most social media companies have policies against misinformation, harassment, and harmful content, although it is acknowledged from this data that in many cases, schools find it difficult to reach these platforms. Platforms operate under community guidelines, which often cover harassment and misinformation but do not always explicitly address defamation. If a post violates these policies, it may be removed, but if not, platforms may refuse to act without a formal legal complaint. Reporting tools allow users to flag false or harmful content, but platforms can interpret free speech broadly, often requiring clear proof of harm before intervening. Of course, this can be frustrating for those who are victims of such abuse, or representing those who are.

If standard reporting fails, a formal defamation complaint may be necessary. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), and TikTok have procedures for handling legal takedown requests, often requiring proof that a statement is false and damaging. Some may ask for a court order before taking action. In cases where a court deems a post defamatory, platforms are more likely to comply with removal requests to avoid liability.

Under UK law, social media platforms are generally not liable for defamation unless they refuse to remove defamatory content or fail to identify the user responsible. The burden therefore falls on individuals to prove their case and pursue legal remedies if platforms do not cooperate. Even with legal processes in place, removing defamatory content can be challenging. Platforms require clear proof that a statement is both false and harmful, and delays in reviewing reports mean damaging content can remain online for extended periods. The anonymity of users further complicates matters, as defamatory statements are often made under fake names or temporary accounts.

Ultimately, social media companies are reactive rather than proactive in handling defamation complaints. Unless content clearly violates their guidelines or they are legally compelled to act, they are unlikely to intervene. As a result, individuals facing defamation online often find persistence, legal action, or both are necessary to protect their reputation.

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between schools and social media platforms, ensuring harmful content is removed efficiently. The helpline's 94.2% removal rate across all platforms demonstrates its effectiveness in navigating the often complex and slow-moving processes of content takedown requests. Schools frequently struggle to get direct responses from social media companies, but POSH, with its established industry relationships and expertise in platform policies, significantly improves the likelihood of successful removals. By acting as an intermediary, the helpline not only reduces the burden on schools and professionals but also helps mitigate reputational damage more swiftly than schools could achieve alone. In cases where content does not meet strict legal thresholds for defamation but is still harmful, POSH's ability to escalate reports through appropriate channels makes it an increasingly invaluable resource for schools and children's workforce professionals seeking timely support and resolution.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT ON THOSE MAKING ENQUIRIES

In a final piece of analysis that has arisen from the analysis of the case logs for the helpline, one that that is worthy of further comment is the tone used by those making enquiries as a reflection of the impact of dealing with the issues.

Concerns ranged from unauthorised use of school branding to critical or mocking content, which may not necessarily breach platform guidelines. The enquiries reflect a mix of emotions, with professionals expressing concern, frustration, urgency, and, at times, helplessness. While the overall tone remains, generally, professional, many messages reveal a growing sense of exasperation at the scale of the issues they face. Professionals express frustrations that while they are committed to protecting students and staff, they often feel unsupported and overwhelmed. Though most maintain a measured approach, some display impatience or bluntness, reflecting frustration.

A strong sense of urgency is evident, with professionals seeking immediate action to remove harmful content. Many messages are direct and pleading, emphasising the need for swift intervention. Phrases such as

"Please can you take this page down?" and

"We desperately need support to get these posts removed."

highlight the ongoing and escalating harm caused by such content. These enquiries expect prompt responses, reflecting the high stakes of online safety incidents.

Alongside urgency, frustration is a common theme, particularly where social media platforms have failed to act. Many messages describe repeated, unsuccessful attempts to report harmful content. One states,

"We have been reporting an account on TikTok, but TikTok has not removed it."

Another reads, **"TikTok don't believe this has met any violations."** The professionals in establishments handling these cases feel let down and powerless, struggling with a system that does not seem to work. In some cases, this leads to blunt wording, such as **"There is absolutely no way to get through to Instagram support."** While not aggressive, these messages convey mounting frustration.

Beyond frustration, concern and a strong protective instinct emerge as professionals emphasise the emotional harm, reputational damage, and safeguarding risks posed by harmful content. One enquiry states, **"The posts are of a bullying nature. These people have only ever tried to help and support the individual."** Another reads, **"We are concerned about the use of our logo and the girl shown."** These messages show that professionals are not just focused on content removal but also on long-term consequences for those affected. Many express a deep sense of responsibility, feeling personally accountable for their students' and colleagues' well-being.

Despite strong emotions, most messages remain structured, polite, and professional. Professionals recognise the importance of constructive communication when requesting assistance. Phrases like **"I would be grateful if you could support in removing this account."** and **"We would appreciate any guidance on how to proceed."** reflect professionalism even under pressure. However, some professionals convey a sense of helplessness, especially when new accounts and harmful content keep reappearing. This repetitive cycle is evident in messages such as **"Another term, another TikTok account!"** and **"We still have two TikTok accounts that are very negative towards our school and our Headteacher. Could you please request that these be shut down?"** The ongoing nature of these issues leaves professionals feeling trapped and exhausted, as reflected in pleas for help, such as **"Please help me. I'm desperate."**

Many enquiries also assume external agencies have the power to intervene directly, with messages like **"Can you please assist us?"** and

"We are hoping you can help us remove this content."

While not aggressive, they reflect an expectation that the helpline or support service can take decisive action, which may not always be the case. Whilst rare, such expectations and the role of the helpline are occasionally misunderstood, assuming that the helpline itself is in some way responsible for the offending content rather than its actual role as a supporting, intermediary partner.

Relatedly, though outright aggression is rare, some messages border on demanding, especially when professionals feel ignored by social media platforms. Examples include:

"We have reported this multiple times, and NOTHING has been done."

"This is unacceptable. Why has this not been removed?"

"How do we escalate this? This needs to be dealt with NOW."

These messages express frustration rather than hostility, with capitalised words such as **"NOTHING"** and **"NOW"** indicating a sense of being ignored rather than intentional rudeness. While forceful, they stem from urgency and helplessness.

The enquiries reveal a deep concern for online safety, frustration at the lack of action from social media platforms, and an urgent need for solutions. Professionals express a protective safeguarding instinct towards students and staff, understandably feeling a strong duty of care. However, there is also exhaustion, impatience and exasperation as they struggle with recurring online safety issues.

While most remain professional and composed, some professionals become blunt or impatient when they feel powerless. Yet, aggression is rare, and frustration is primarily directed at social media platforms, not the helpline.

Conclusions

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) case analysis for 2023-24 provides a critical insight into the growing complexities of online safety issues faced by education professionals and those members of the children's workforce working with young people. With over 2,200 cases recorded, the data highlights persistent challenges such as online reputation attacks, cyberbullying, impersonation, and the unauthorised use of school branding. The widespread impact of social media, particularly platforms like TikTok (which accounts for 76% of reported cases), continues to pose difficulties for schools, with harmful content spreading rapidly and proving difficult to remove. However, whilst TikTok forms the majority of client requests received, the current POSH/TikTok partnership arrangement provides a demonstrable benefit resulting in a more responsive approach to helpline requests than is typically seen for other platforms, resulting in a benefit to both POSH clients and TikTok. It is also important to note that TikTok is the only platform directly promoted to schools by the helpline, which may contribute to the volume of reports received.

Expanding upon this, the education expertise of POSH offers significant benefit to online platforms as a whole through its knowledge and understanding of the particular challenges faced within the education sector, including those statutory responsibilities to which schools and colleges must abide.

The most significant challenge remains the broad scope of online abuse categorised under bullying, which now includes harassment, defamation, coercion, and even criminal acts like sextortion and blackmail. Schools are increasingly reporting frustration with social media platforms' slow response times and inconsistent enforcement of their own policies, leaving professionals feeling powerless in protecting students and staff. The analysis also highlights the emotional toll on those making enquiries, with many expressing urgency, desperation, and exasperation at the lack of action from social media companies.

Despite these challenges, POSH has proven to be an invaluable intermediary, successfully navigating platform policies and achieving an impressive 94.2% content removal rate across all platforms. Schools and children's workforce professionals benefit significantly from the helpline's partnership activities and direct industry contacts, which yield better outcomes than individual reporting attempts. The data very strongly supports the continued need for a dedicated service that can advocate for schools and professionals, ensuring swift content removal and offering expert guidance on mitigating online harms.

Moving forward, strengthening digital safeguarding policies, enhancing online safety education and advocating for improved industry accountability must remain priorities. The findings reinforce the critical role of POSH in ensuring that schools and professionals receive the support they need in tackling increasingly complex and damaging online threats.

GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY USED IN THE REPORT

POSH (Professionals Online Safety Helpline): A dedicated support service for professionals working with children and young people, providing advice, mediation and signposting for online safety issues.

Impersonation: The creation of fake social media accounts or profiles to pose as an organisation or another individual, often used to spread false information or defame.

Reputational Damage: Harm caused to an individual's or organisation's public perception, often through defamatory content, impersonation or misleading information.

Defamation: The act of making false statements that cause damage to an individual's or organisation's reputation. Under UK law, defamatory statements must meet certain legal criteria for serious harm.

Doxxing: The act of publicly sharing private or personal information about an individual without their consent, often with malicious intent.

Sextortion: A form of blackmail in which individuals are threatened with the release of intimate images or videos unless they meet demands, such as providing more explicit content or money.

Community guidelines: Social media platforms rules that set expectations for user behaviour intended to support a safe, respectful and inclusive environment for users.

Content Takedown: The process of requesting harmful or inappropriate content be removed from social media platforms or websites. To be effective, requests need to highlight how content breaches community guidelines.

Fake Accounts: Fraudulent profiles created to impersonate individuals or institutions, frequently used for spreading misinformation, bullying or harassment.

Underage Use: Children under the platform's published age requirements (typically 13) creating and managing social media accounts, often posing additional safeguarding concerns.

Peer-to-Peer Bullying: Bullying that occurs between individuals in the same age group, commonly within school communities and often facilitated through social media.

Online Harassment: Persistent and unwanted targeting of individuals through offensive or threatening content online.

Unauthorised Use of School Branding: The misuse of school logos, images or symbols to create misleading associations or promote harmful content.

Privacy Breach: The exposure of personal data or images without consent, which can occur through hacking, doxxing or other methods.

Misinformation: False or misleading information spread online, which can damage reputations, create false narratives or cause confusion.