

# UK Safer Internet Helpline Annual Report



The Professionals Online Safety Helpline  
Annual Report November 2020

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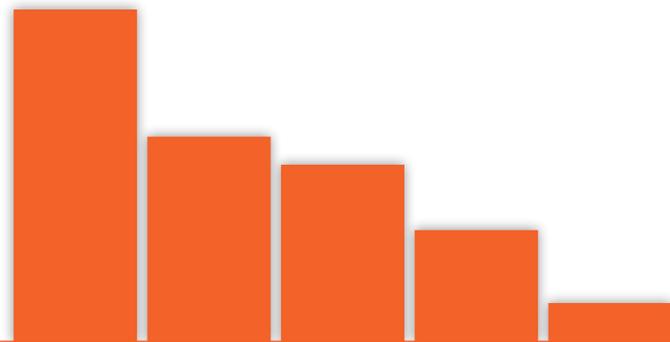


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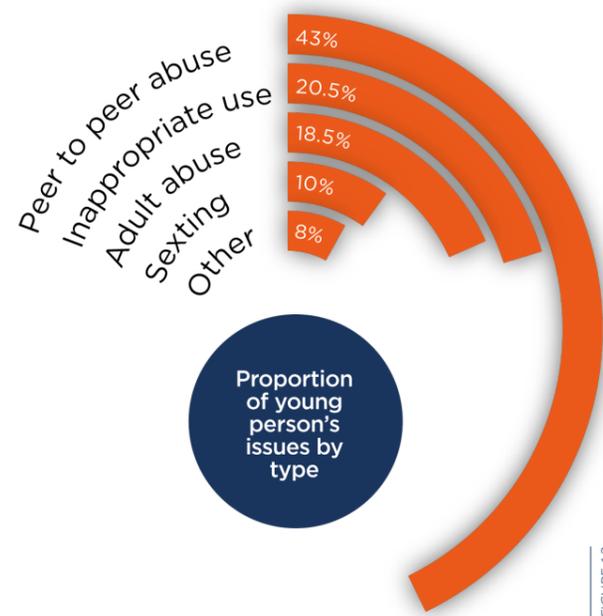
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) is a national helpline and part of the UK Safer Internet Centre that assists members of the children's workforce with any online safety and safeguarding issue. The service is operated by South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) and co-funded by the European Commission. **The service was set up in 2011** following evidence regarding the many new challenges faced by professionals in the digital world. Since its inception, POSH has helped a wide range of professionals including teachers, other school staff, early years' practitioners, police, foster and adoption carers, youth club leaders, volunteers, sports coaches and medical practitioners. POSH operates an email and helpline service, open Monday-Friday, 10-4. Helpline practitioners offer independent and confidential advice on a number of issues including cyberbullying, gaming, grooming, sexting, inappropriate online behaviour, digital privacy and reputation management. The service also advises on how to understand and apply government guidelines regarding technology use in schools, alongside signposting to relevant resources and support services. POSH also has a unique relationship with a number of industry platforms and, where helpline clients are having issues with harmful content hosted on social media, POSH is able to act as a mediator, escalating content for removal.

POSH operates an email and helpline service, open Monday to Friday, 10am–4pm

In order to gain a greater understanding of the types of challenges facing members of the children's workforce today, including the ways in which these have changed in the last 9 years, this report presents mixed-methods research carried out on cases dealt with by POSH during 2019 (Jan–Dec). In the year analysed, POSH dealt with 844 unique cases, totalling 1895 contacts with clients. Peaks and troughs in cases coincided with school term times and holidays, and a larger peak in cases between January and March was observed, coinciding with the 'Momo' challenge. The majority of clients contacting the helpline were teachers (67%). The helpline also saw a greater proportion of contacts from females (64%) and professionals



located in the South West (19%). The primary issue presented by helpline clients related to online reputation, followed by potentially harmful content, media literacy/education and cyberbullying. Less commonly reported were issues regarding sexual harassment, data privacy, grooming, sexting, technical settings and love and relationships. Practitioners were able to assist clients by providing emotional support and offering advice on content, policy or procedures. They also made referrals for practical support, provided links to the correct reporting forms on social media platforms and escalated content for removal.

Complex cases (e.g. where online victimisation, safety, safeguarding and harmful behaviour were clear concerns) were analysed in more depth. Results from this analysis revealed that complex

Proportion of professionals' issues by type

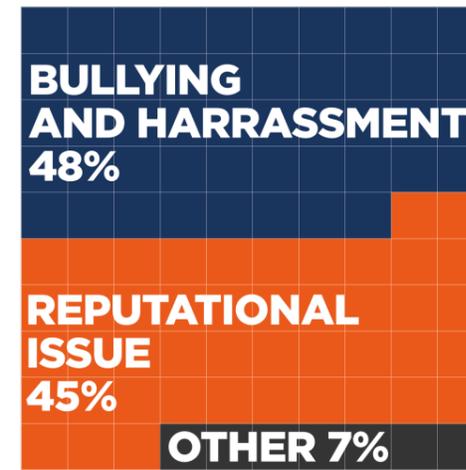


FIGURE 17

cases could be categorised into one of two types: (1) professionals contacting the helpline regarding incidents involving and/or affecting young people (53%) and (2) professionals contacting the helpline regarding incidents involving and/or affecting professionals (either themselves or others) (47%). Within both categories, further sub-types were also identified.

Cases involving young people contained four identifiable subtypes: (1) peer to peer abuse (42.86%), (2) adult abuse (largely grooming, 18.37%), (3) inappropriate internet use (including viewing and distributing pornographic, violent or terrorist content, 20.41%) and (4) 'sexting' (non-consensual sharing of Youth Produced Sexual Imagery between peers, 10.20%). For each sub-type, patterns regarding nature, age and gender of victim, platform location, impacts, and professional's responses were identified. In the latter section of this report, recommendations were made regarding these various trends. Recommendations included providing greater support for victims of public cyberbullying, encouraging disclosures of grooming, alongside encouraging professionals to contact POSH for help with these disclosures, developing targeted resources for young people engaging in inappropriate internet use, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and educating on how best to respond to sexting incidents in a gender sensitive way. An overall need for social media platforms to play a greater role in proactively removing or positively responding to incidents was also observed.

Cases involving professionals contained two identifiable subtypes: (1) bullying and harassment

by students (48%) and (2) reputational issues arising as a result of allegations, reviews or complaints (45%). For each sub-type, patterns regarding nature, gender of victim, platform location, impacts, and professional's responses were identified. In relation to professional's issues as a whole, trends regarding gender disparities, both in terms of patterns of online victimisation and contact to the helpline were also observed. As was noted, whilst male professionals were uniquely vulnerable to accusations of paedophilia, female staff members were equally likely to be victims of student bullying, and more likely to be the victims of reputational complaints. Further to this, whilst male staff members commonly contacted the helpline for assistance when they were targets of abuse, it was overwhelmingly female members of staff who contacted the helpline about cases involving young people, representing the higher burden of emotional labour placed upon female professionals when it comes to administering pastoral care. Recommendations were also made in response to these various trends.

## THIS REPORT HIGHLIGHTS THE NECESSITY AND UNIQUE VALUE OF POSH

Recommendations included targeting bullying behaviour and supporting teachers in dealing with bullying incidents and their repercussions, offering gender specific support through school networks and raising awareness amongst professionals of the ways in which services might be able to assist with reputational issues. Again, the overall need for social media platforms to take action in bullying cases was also observed.

Overall, this report highlights the necessity and unique value of POSH. This was evidenced through the broad range of advice offered, the ways in which practitioners are able to tailor their support to the specific needs of the client and the helpline's ability to respond to trends observed more broadly within educational settings (e.g. Momo). **Given the evident value of the helpline, alongside the fact that it is currently operating at full capacity, an urgent need to secure additional funding streams was also identified.** A number of aspects of service growth and development were outlined, towards which any future funding would usefully be applied.

# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS THE PROFESSIONALS ONLINE SAFETY HELPLINE?

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) is a national helpline and part of the UK Safer Internet Centre that assists members of the children's workforce with any online safety and safeguarding issue. The service is operated by South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) and co-funded by the European Commission. The service was set up in 2011 following emerging evidence regarding the new challenges faced by professionals in the digital world. Broadly these challenges were twofold and included (1) the challenge of responding to online incidents experienced by young people under the care of professionals and (2) the challenge of dealing with abuse professionals themselves might experience online. Whilst, in 2011, many services existed which directly supported young people and their parents with online issues, there was a gap in the market for a more specialist service to assist professionals; POSH was borne out of this gap.

Since its inception, POSH has helped a wide range of professionals including teachers, other school staff, early years practitioners, police, foster and adoption carers, youth club leaders, volunteers, sports coaches, and medical practitioners. POSH operates an email and helpline service, open Monday-Friday, 10-4. Helpline practitioners offer independent and confidential advice on a number of issues including cyberbullying, gaming, grooming, sexting, inappropriate online behaviour, digital privacy and reputation management. The service also advises on how to understand and apply government guidelines regarding technology use in schools, alongside signposting to relevant resources and support services. Finally, POSH has a unique relationship with a number of industry platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Roblox, TikTok, Microsoft (which includes LinkedIn, Bing, Xbox, Skype and Minecraft) and Google (which includes YouTube, YouTube Kids, Google Search and Blogger). Where helpline clients are having issues with removing harmful content hosted on these social media platforms, POSH is able to act as a mediator, escalating content for removal.



## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT?

Research exploring the operation of support services has an integral role to play in improving practice and facilitating the exchange of knowledge. Whilst a pilot year evaluation into helpline operations was carried out in 2012, and a more focused piece of research explored intimate image abuse on POSH in 2019, there exists no recent research evaluating overall trends on POSH. Digital technologies and online life have become almost unrecognisable since 2011 when the helpline opened, and there is a need to keep abreast of this change. In order to gain a greater understanding of the types of challenges facing members of the children's workforce today, including the ways in which these have changed in the last 19 years, this report presents mixed-methods research carried out on cases dealt with by POSH in 2019. This report begins by presenting top level statistics, it then moves on to discussing more complex cases observed on the helpline. It concludes by outlining suggestions for responding to emerging trends, alongside offering recommendations for helpline growth and development. The principle author of this report is both a trained social researcher and a practitioner on POSH.

## WHO IS THIS REPORT FOR?

The primary purpose of this research was to review current helpline trends so that these could be fed back into service provision. However, this report has also been designed with third parties in mind in the interests of information and best practice sharing. To that end, it will appeal to educational establishments, professionals who use the service, government departments, and other support agencies involved in the care of young people, including the police and local authorities. More broadly, this report will also be of interest to academics, researchers, journalists and others with an occupational interest in education, professional wellbeing and online safety.

“““

**SINCE ITS  
INCEPTION,  
POSH HAS  
HELPED A WIDE  
RANGE OF  
PROFESSIONALS**

# TOP LEVEL STATISTICS

Frequency of helpline cases per month



FIGURE 1

## HELPLINE USE

In the year analysed, POSH dealt with **844 unique cases, totalling 1895 contacts** with clients. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of cases per month. Overall, this represents a typical pattern experienced every year, with peaks and troughs coinciding with school term times and holidays. The larger peak in cases between January and March is more anomalous, and can be explained by the influx of cases regarding the 'Momo' challenge. Similar peaks have been experienced in previous years (for example in relation to the 'Blue Whale' challenge in early 2016). What can be surmised from this figure is that, Momo challenge aside, within term times, **POSH dealt with around 60 cases per month.**

Clients contacting the helpline demonstrated a relatively even preference for phone vs email communication. Figure 2 shows the proportion of enquiry channels by type.

Enquiry channels by type



FIGURE 2

## CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS

POSH records basic client demographics including profession, gender and location. In terms of profession, the majority of clients contacting the helpline were teachers (562 cases), followed by other school staff (166 cases), parents (38 cases), police officers (31 cases), social workers (30 cases) and young people (14 cases). These figures represent the diversification of the helpline service as, when the helpline was first established, the majority of its contacts came from teachers. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of helpline client by profession

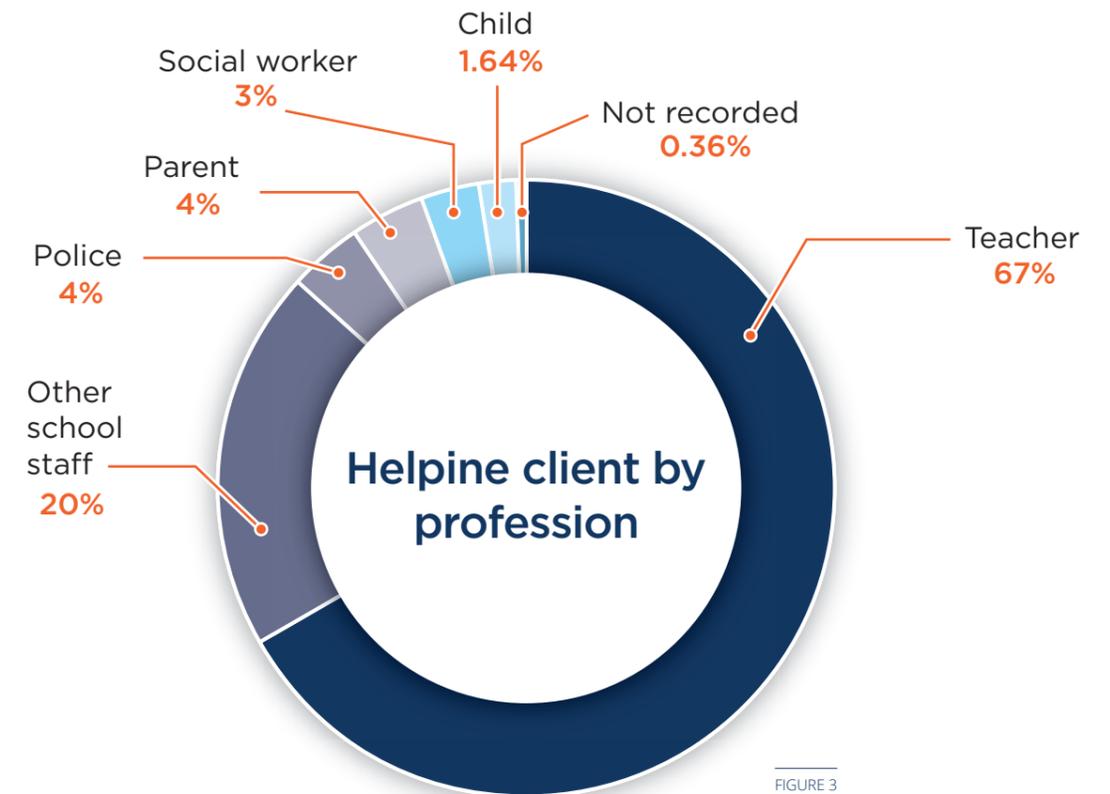


FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4

The majority of helpline clients were female (540) as opposed to male (289). Whilst, to some extent, this can be accounted for by the gender ratio within the teaching profession, more complexity was identified through analysis of cases in more depth, as will be discussed later in this report. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of helpline client by gender.

## Helpline cases by region

The largest number of helpline clients were located in the South West (157 cases), followed by the North West (86 cases), Greater London (80 cases) and the South East (52 cases). The helpline dealt with a much lower number of clients based in areas such as Yorkshire and the Humber (22 cases) and the East of England (21 cases). Rather than demonstrating differing proportions of online issues experienced in various parts on the country, these figures are reflective of the fact that the helpline is based in the South West and initially only covered this region. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of helpline client by location.

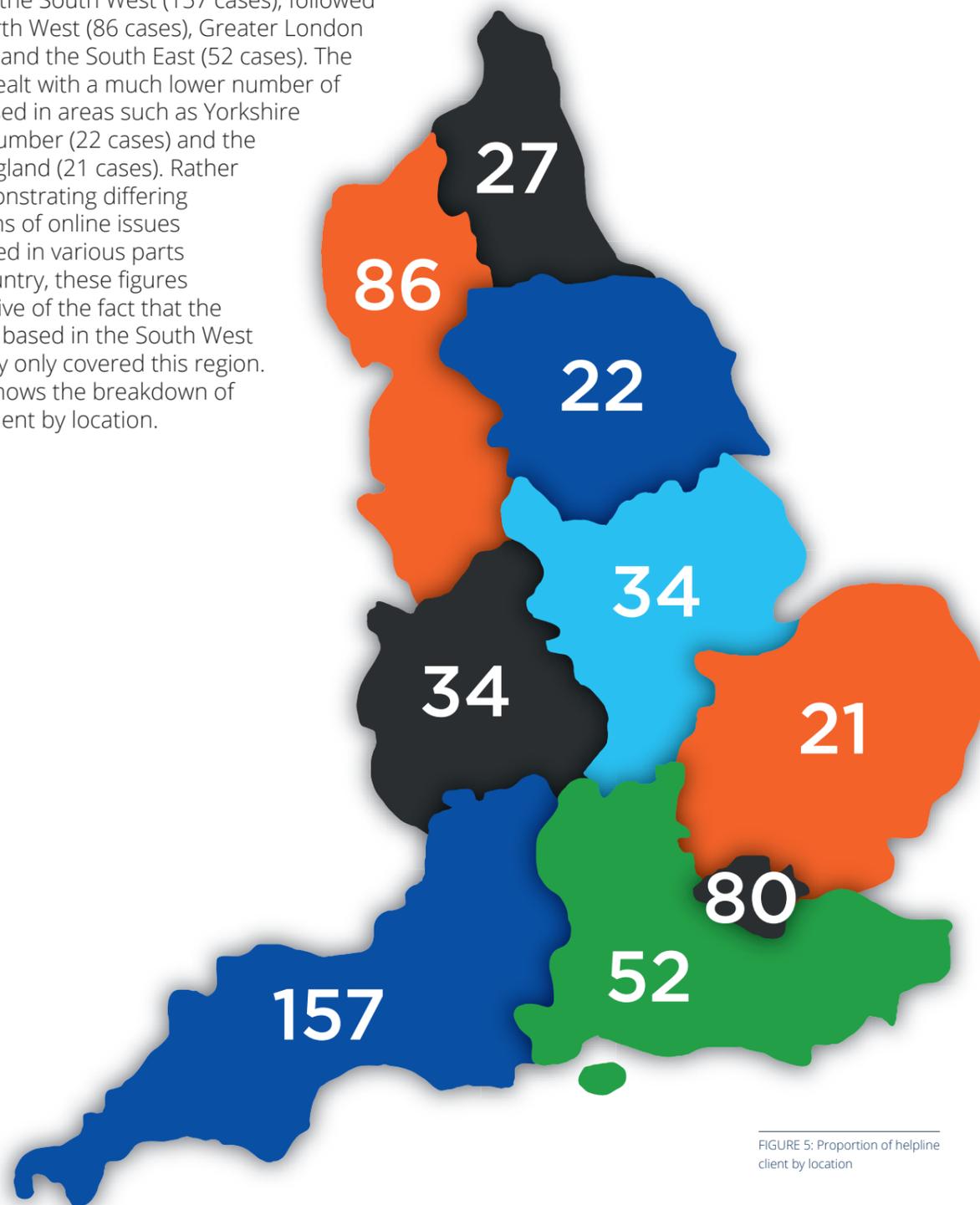


FIGURE 5: Proportion of helpline client by location

## NATURE OF CASES

POSH is equipped to deal with a variety of online safety and safeguarding issues. These include:

- 1 Cyberbullying: abuse and harassment using online technologies.
- 2 Data privacy issues: private information, such as photos, personal details and identity documents, published online without consent.
- 3 Grooming: adult contact with minors where attempts are made to build trusting relationships for the purpose of sexual exploitation.
- 4 Love and relationship issues: problems which might occur when young people explore sex and relationships online.
- 5 Media literacy/education: an umbrella term which covers all information seeking enquiries regarding any aspect of online technology, including general use, policies and responding to incidents.
- 6 Online reputation: enquiries regarding threats to school or staff reputation and good standing as a result of action online.
- 7 Potentially harmful content: material identified to be harmful, and/or disturbing to emotional or psychological wellbeing, including pornography, self-harm/suicide content and violent content.
- 8 Sexting: sharing of intimate images amongst young people via online technologies (also termed Youth Produced Sexual Imagery (YPSI)).
- 9 Sexual harassment: abuse involving sexualised language or persistent and unsolicited messages of a sexual nature.
- 10 Technical settings: enquiries regarding how to set up, operate and manage technology.

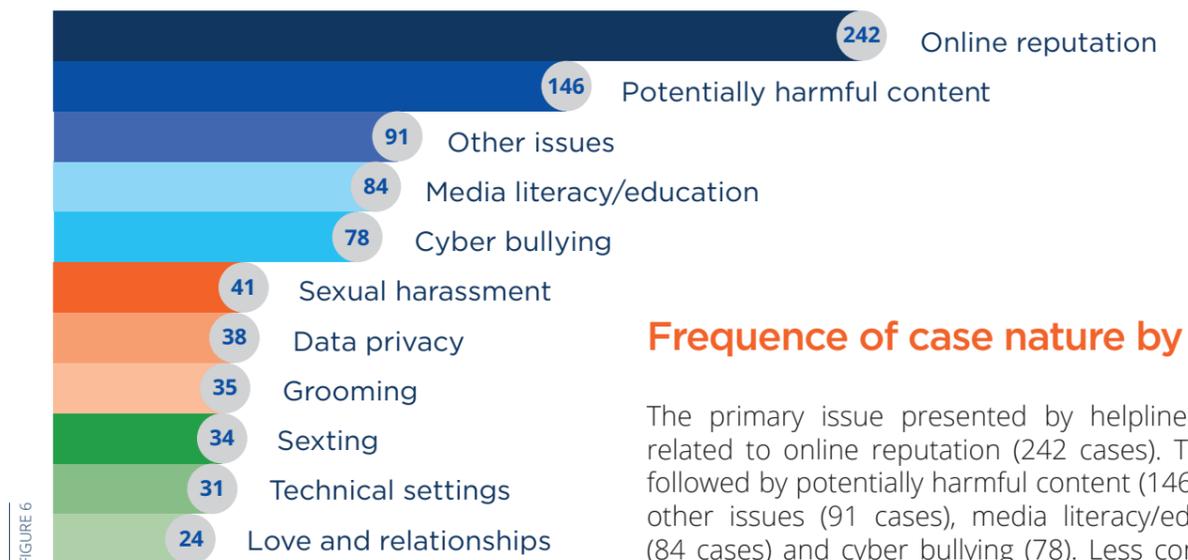
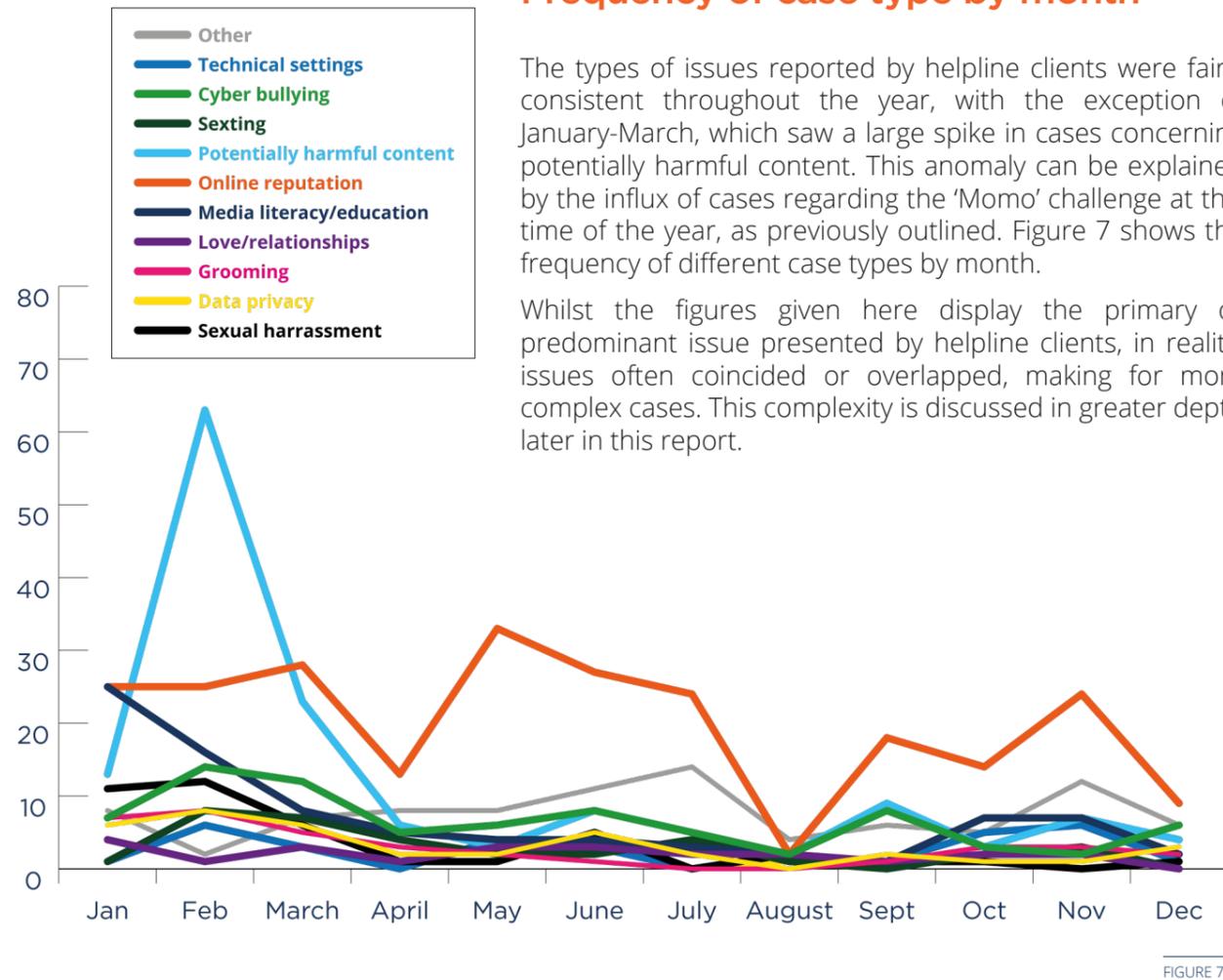


FIGURE 6

### Frequency of case nature by type

The primary issue presented by helpline clients related to online reputation (242 cases). This was followed by potentially harmful content (146 cases), other issues (91 cases), media literacy/education (84 cases) and cyber bullying (78). Less commonly reported were issues regarding sexual harassment (41 cases), data privacy (38 cases), grooming (35 cases), sexting (34 cases), technical settings (31 cases) and love and relationships (24 cases). Figure 6 shows the frequency of case nature by type.

### Frequency of case type by month



The types of issues reported by helpline clients were fairly consistent throughout the year, with the exception of January-March, which saw a large spike in cases concerning potentially harmful content. This anomaly can be explained by the influx of cases regarding the 'Momo' challenge at this time of the year, as previously outlined. Figure 7 shows the frequency of different case types by month.

Whilst the figures given here display the primary or predominant issue presented by helpline clients, in reality, issues often coincided or overlapped, making for more complex cases. This complexity is discussed in greater depth later in this report.

FIGURE 7

## ASSISTANCE PROVIDED

Clients contacting the helpline about any of the issues discussed above often had a multitude of concerns and sought a range of advice, resources and solutions. Broadly, the types of assistance sought by clients could be broken down into the following:

- 1 Advice on procedures e.g. how to respond to incidents.
- 2 Advice on policy e.g. clarification on government guidelines and requirements, including how these should be applied in practice.
- 3 Advice on content e.g. clarification on the nature of images, videos, chats and trends found online, including advice on whether content breaches terms and regulations.
- 4 Action on content e.g. requesting that content be removed from apps, networks or the web.
- 5 Emotional support e.g. listening, reassurance or the change to talk through various options and discuss feelings.
- 6 Practical support e.g. referrals to other support agencies or the provision of resources.

### Assistance requests by type

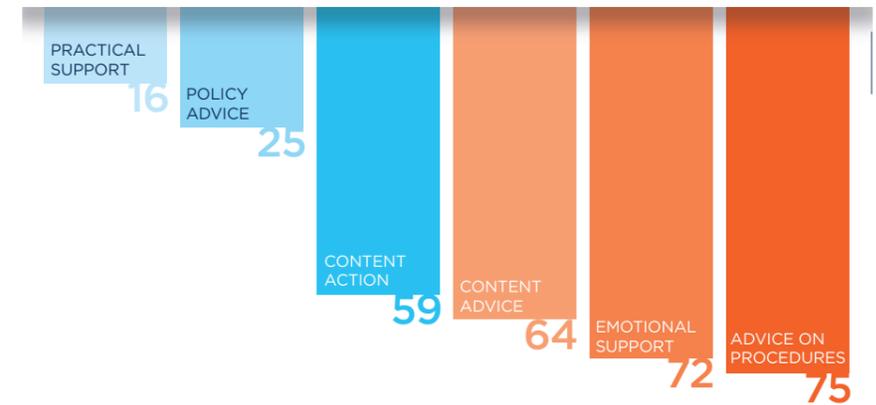


FIGURE 8

### Assistance provided by type

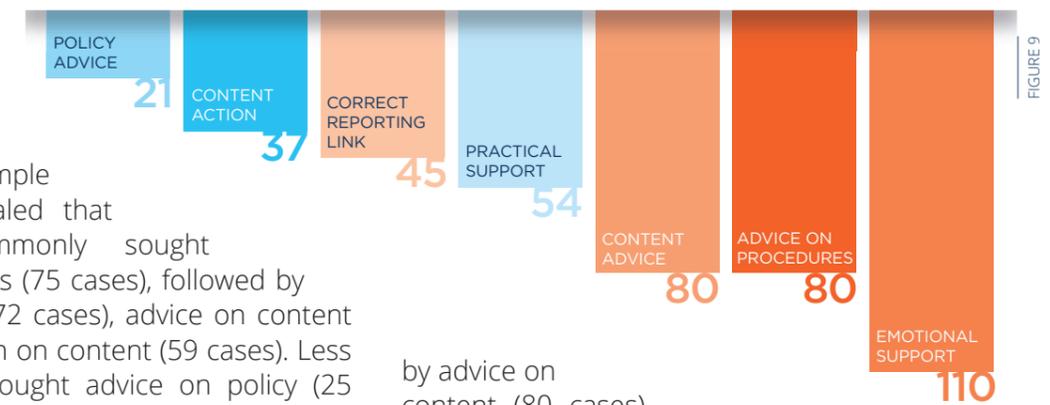


FIGURE 9

A cross-sectional sample of 200 cases revealed that clients most commonly sought advice on procedures (75 cases), followed by emotional support (72 cases), advice on content (64 cases), and action on content (59 cases). Less commonly, clients sought advice on policy (25 cases) and practical support (16 cases). The total number of assistance requests is greater than the total number of cases sampled as clients commonly sought assistance in more than one area. Figure 8 shows frequency of assistance requests by type.

Analysis of the same cross-sectional sample of 200 cases revealed that the helpline responded to the assistance request presented by the client, as well as offering additional advice and support in other areas. Most commonly practitioners provided emotional support (110 cases), followed

by advice on content (80 cases), advice on procedures (80 cases), practical support (54 cases), action on content (37 cases) and advice on policy (21 cases). The helpline also provided links to the correct reporting forms on social media platforms in 45 cases. These higher numbers, as compared to assistance requests, reveals that the service goes above and beyond what the client requests of it, anticipating the ways in which additional sources of support will further assist clients. Figure 9 shows frequency of assistance provided by type.

**“““  
THE SERVICE GOES ABOVE AND BEYOND WHAT THE CLIENT REQUESTS OF IT, ANTICIPATING THE WAYS IN WHICH ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT WILL FURTHER ASSIST CLIENTS**

## Client feedback

Qualitative analysis of client feedback also revealed ways in which clients were assisted and the value they assigned to the service. The unique nature of POSH, and its ability to help in ways where other services could not, was discussed.

The attitude of practitioners to young people, professionals and carers was highlighted, and perhaps most prominently, the breadth of knowledge, in combination with the emotional skills offered by helpline practitioners was described.

**“(The helpline) is always supportive and considerate of the young people involved. Never punitive”**



(The practitioner) was amazing, **there would be nothing I would change about how she handled a very delicate situation.**

(She) was so professional and supportive to my very worried student, she worked swiftly to resolve the issue and get in touch with us to let us know what was happening from her end, she kept us up to date and informed.



**“Extremely helpful, friendly, understanding and informative. (The practitioner) resolved the issue within a couple of hours. Very grateful for her prompt dealing of the matter – something we had tried to resolve ourselves, but hadn’t yet been able to. She communicated the situation very promptly too.”**



**SIMPLY BEING THERE FOR SCHOOLS LIKE OURS IS AMAZING. THE SUPPORT, GUIDANCE AND REASSURANCE FOR OUR YOUNG STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES AND THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY IS SECOND TO NONE!**



**EXCELLENT - WE REALLY CAN'T THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR YOUR SUPPORT.**

**We contacted a number of agencies for support and advice on our issue and you were the only ones able to help us and you did so in a calm, efficient and speedy way.**

Frequency of cases and contacts by year

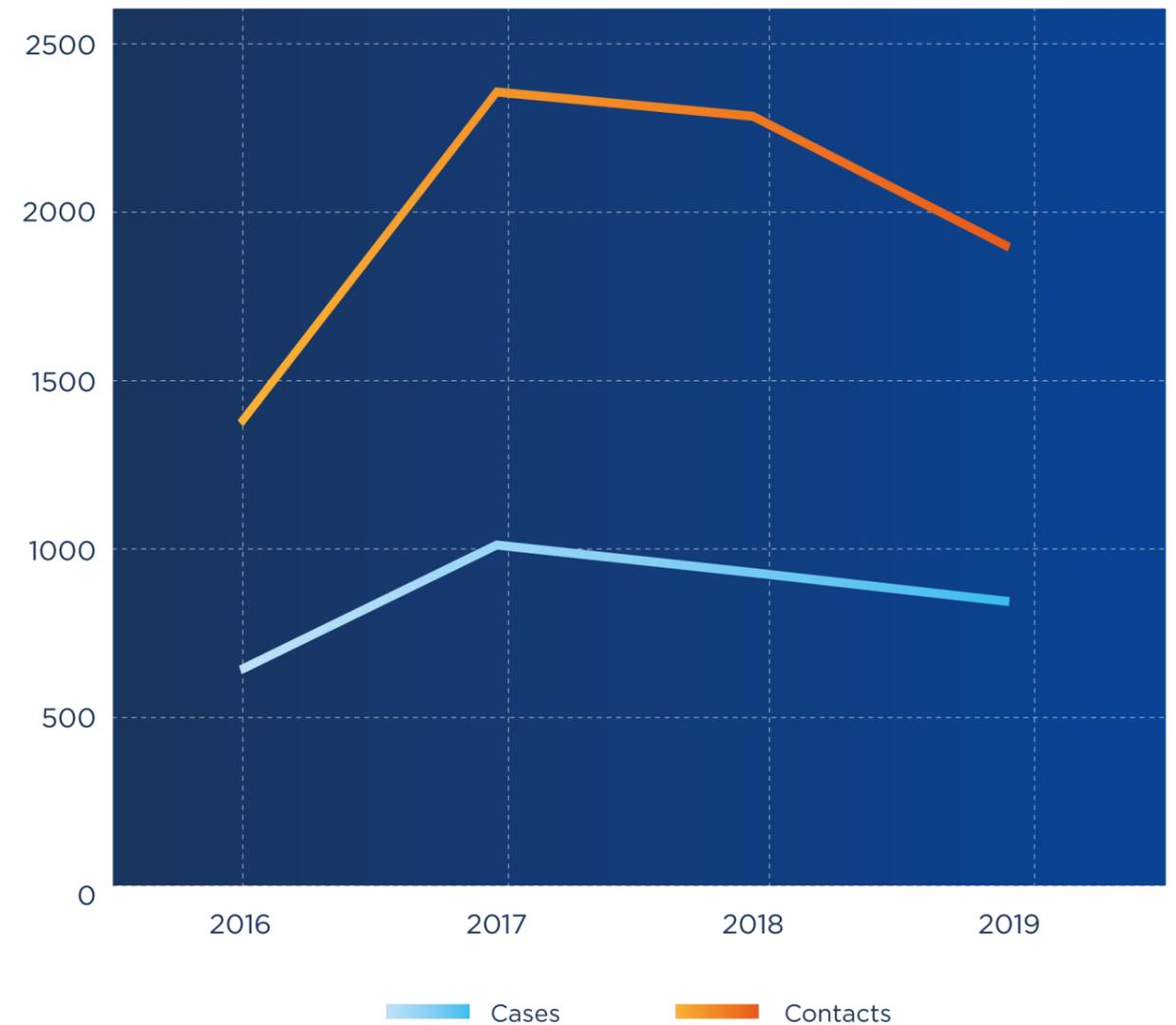


FIGURE 10

## ANNUAL COMPARISON

Alongside analysing data from 2019, the volume of cases and contacts received in this year was mapped against previous years. Figure 10 shows the number of cases and contacts by year, from 2016-2019. As is evident, cases and contacts dramatically peaked in 2017, and have marginally declined since then. Rather than this being

demonstrative of a decline in need for the helpline, these figures are, instead, related to issues with resourcing. Prior to 2017, the helpline was running with increased staff capacity, meaning that time could be devoted to outreach, public engagement and awareness raising. Since running at reduced capacity, this area of service has had to have been side-lined. The implications of this, alongside proposed solutions, will be discussed in a later section of this report.

# EXPLORING COMPLEX CASES IN MORE DEPTH

Whilst categorising cases according to their core issue is useful for top level analysis, it doesn't tell us much about the details of individual cases or the more complex issues and trends. In order to examine these issues in more depth, mixed-methods analysis was carried out on a sample of some of the more complex cases dealt with by the helpline. Here, 'complex cases' were defined as cases where online victimisation, safety, safeguarding and harmful behaviour were clear concerns, with cases concerning information requests, media literacy and technical settings being excluded. The sample was comprised of all complex cases dealt with in the months of January, May and September. These months were selected so as to provide a cross-sectional representation of the year, with a month from each school term being analysed. A total of 93 complex cases fell within the sample.

## Proportion of issues by demographic affected

Complex cases could be categorised into one of two types, representing the dual remit of the

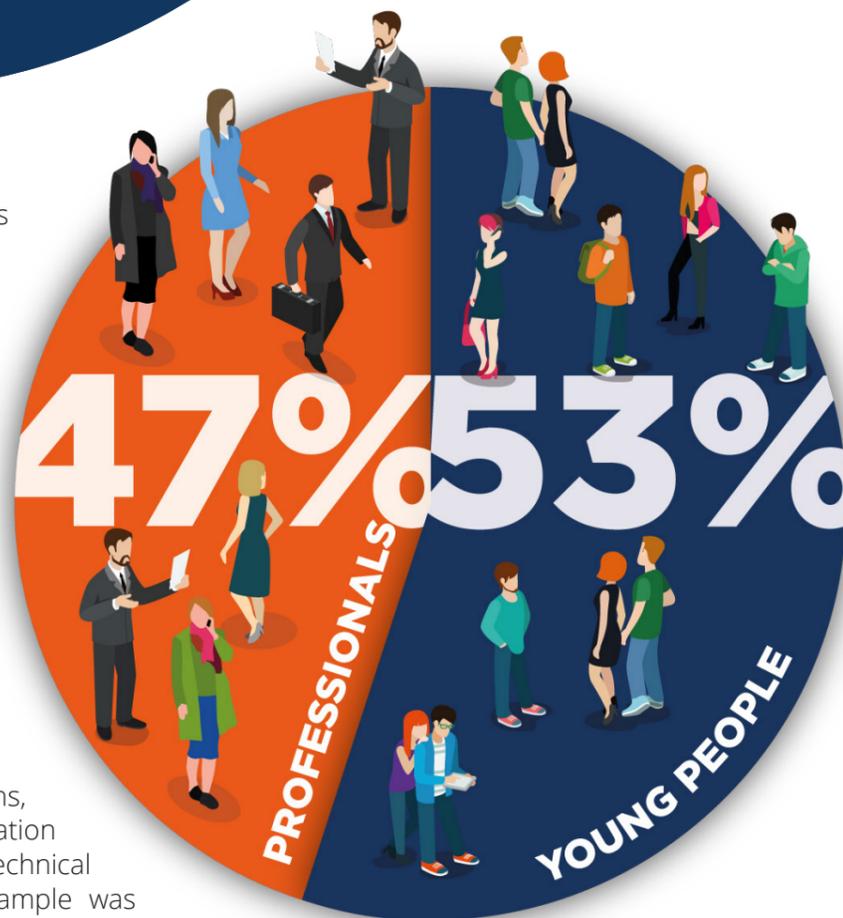


FIGURE 11: Proportion of issues by demographic affected

helpline: (1) Professionals contacting the helpline regarding incidents involving and/or affecting young people (49 cases). (2) Professionals contacting the helpline regarding incidents involving and/or affecting professionals (either themselves and others) (44 cases). Figure 11 represents this as a proportion, showing that there is a relatively even split in how the helpline is being used.

## CASES INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE

Cases involving young people (53% of total complex cases sampled) could be further categorised into four identifiable types: (1) peer to peer abuse (21 cases), (2) adult abuse (9 cases), (3) inappropriate use (10 cases) and (4) 'sexting' (Youth Produced Sexual Imagery (YPSI)) (5 cases). Figure 12 shows proportion of young person's cases by type.

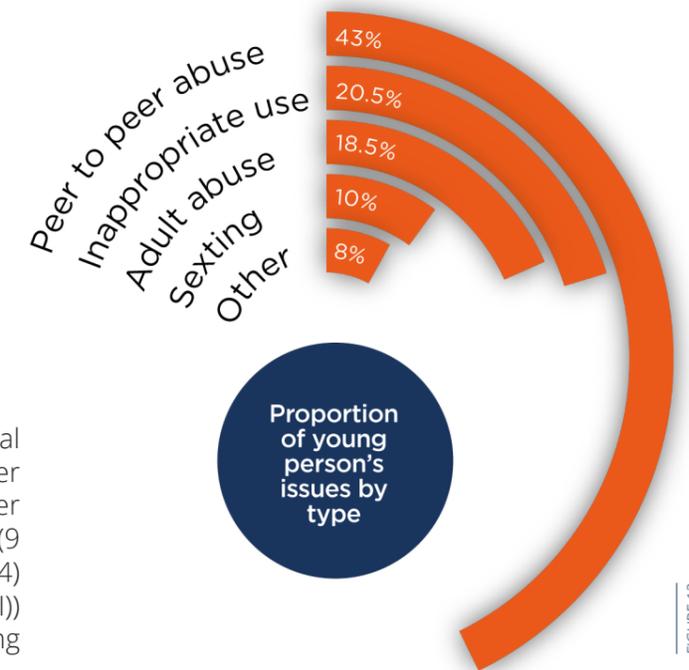
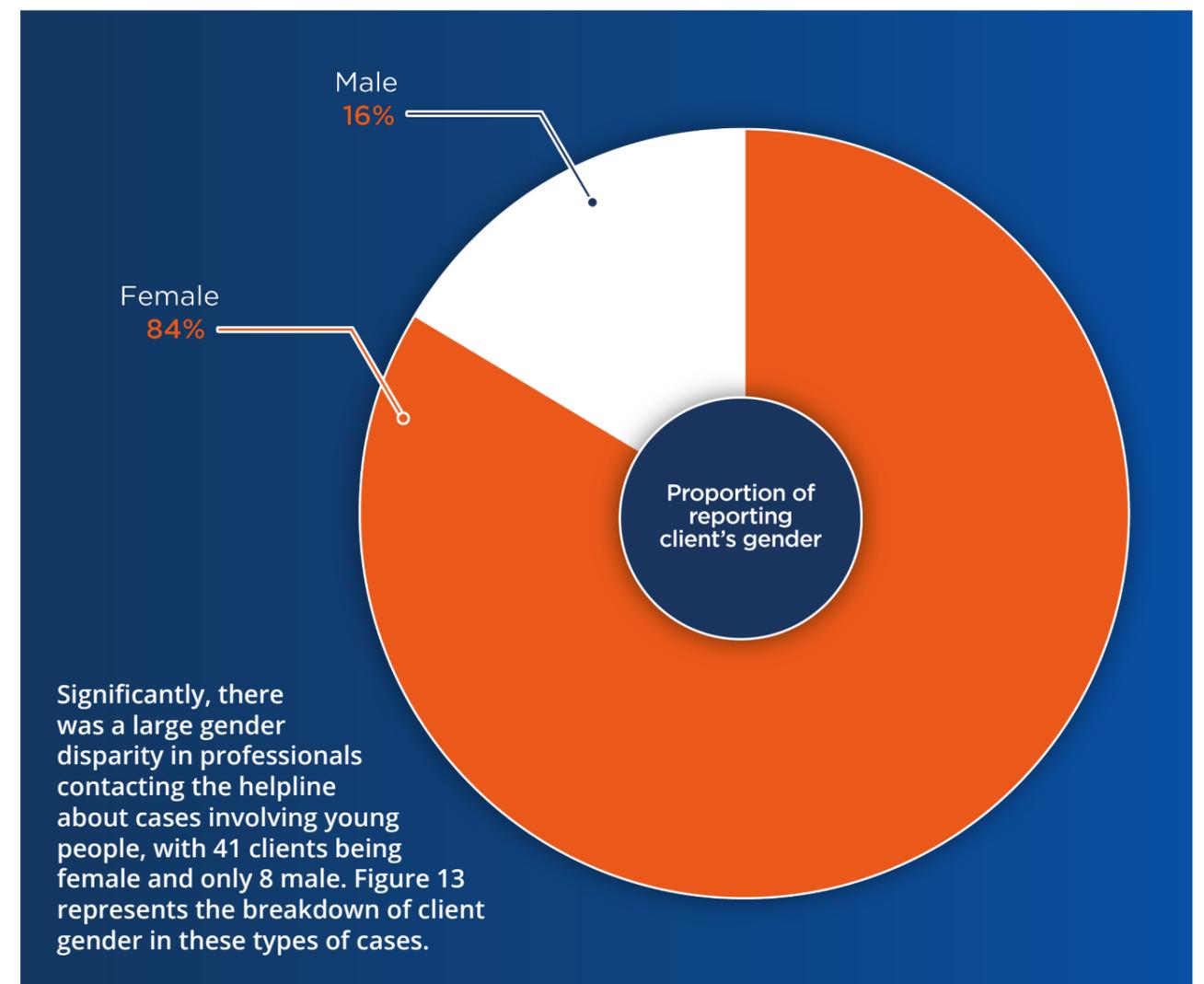


FIGURE 12





## WORRYINGLY, IN 81% OF INCIDENTS THE VICTIM SUFFERED SIGNIFICANT DISTRESS AS A RESULT OF BEING BULLIED, WITH A FURTHER 29% HAVING SELF-HARMED

### PEER TO PEER ABUSE

This category covers cyberbullying and/or harassment taking place between peer groups, including name-calling and insults, online humiliation, excluding from social networks and sending intimidating or threatening messages. Peer to peer abuse could roughly be broken down into two types: that which took place on public platforms (e.g. meme pages, 43%), and that which took place in private communications (e.g. over text or messenger apps, 57%). 52% of bullying victims were female, 24% were male and 24% were mixed or the gender was not given (Figure 14). The majority (88%) of this type of abuse occurred between secondary age children, as compared to primary (12%). In 57% of cases the perpetrator was unknown, as compared to 43% known (Figure 15). The majority of these incidents took place on Instagram (48%), followed by Facebook (19%), Snapchat (14%), YouTube (10%) and Other platforms (9%) (Figure 16). In 29% of cases bullying was reported as an ongoing or recurrent issue. Worryingly, in 81% of incidents the victim suffered significant distress as a result of being bullied, with a further 29% having self-harmed.

The response of the professional dealing with these types of cases could be seen to widely differ, depending upon whether the incident was public vs private in nature. Public cyberbullying largely took the form of an anonymous meme page where individuals were encouraged to view, submit and comment on humiliating memes of multiple students within the same

school. These pages often used the school's name and logo. Given the revealing nature of this, professionals were mainly concerned with having content removed, viewing this as a school reputation issue. There was relatively little concern for supporting the students affected or tackling the behaviour of those responsible. This stood in stark contrast to private incidents of cyberbullying wherein both of these factors were a concern. In responding to these types of cases, helpline practitioners largely offered advice on caring for the young people involved, including speaking to parents and addressing broader school culture. In instances where cyberbullying was public, POSH was also able to assist with the removal of content.

Bullying victims by gender

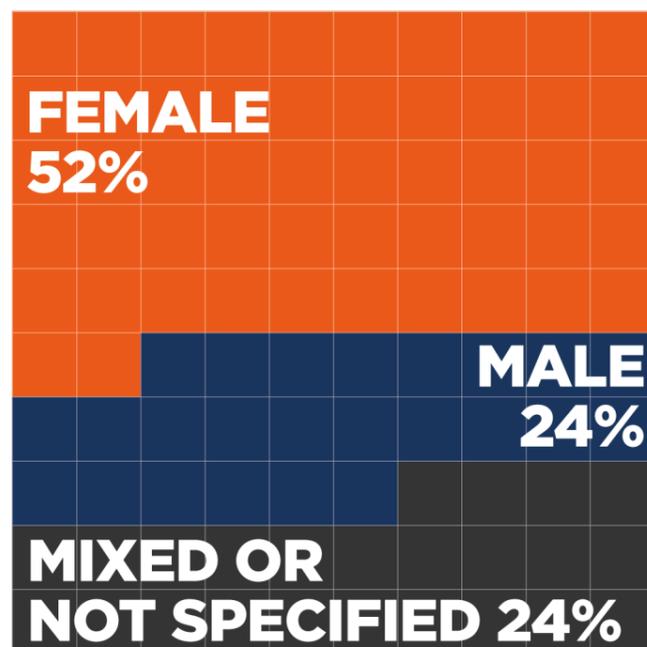


FIGURE 14

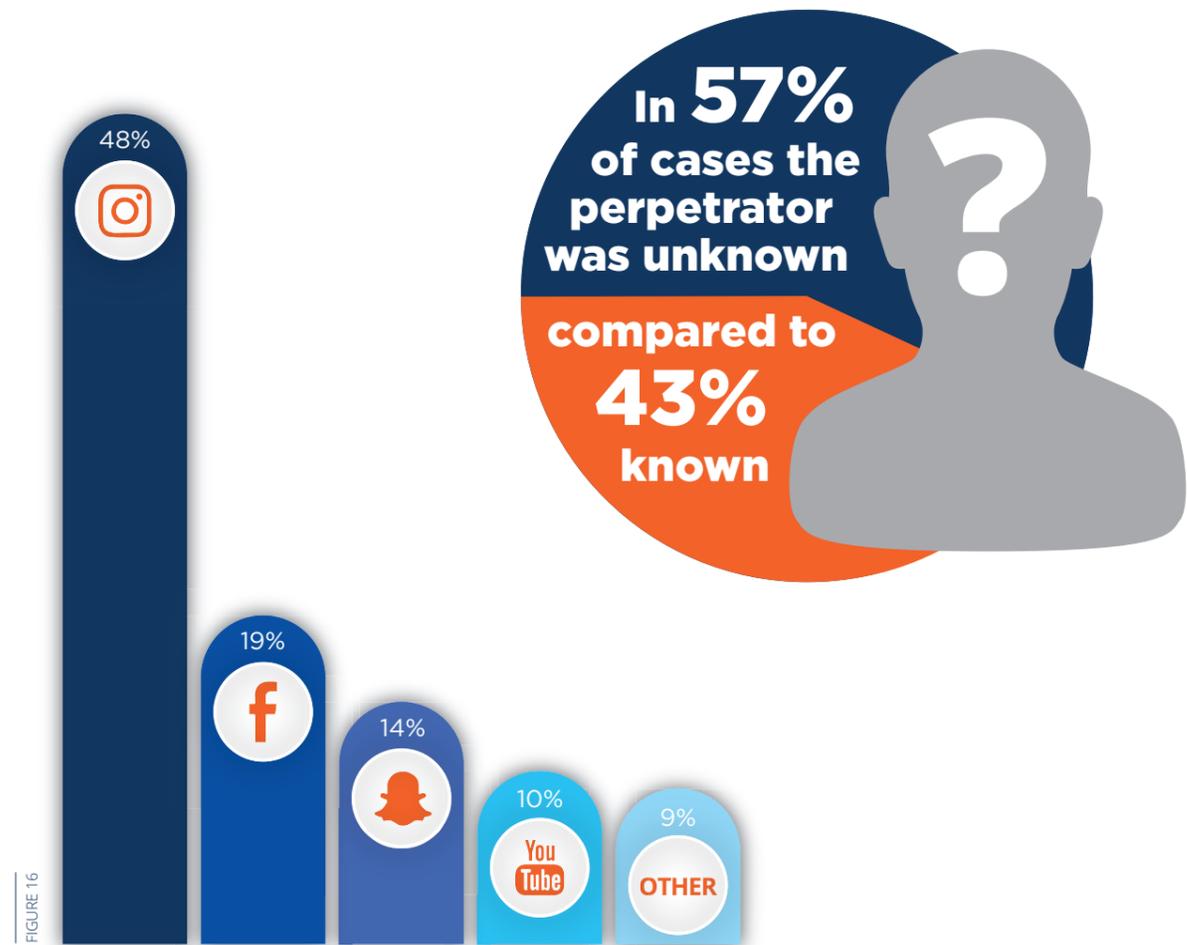
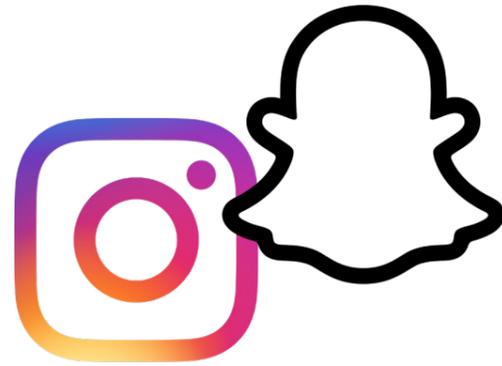


FIGURE 15

### ADULT ABUSE

This category covers a range of grooming behaviours including attempts to form trusting relationships, the soliciting of images and videos and unwanted sexual advances (both text and image based). 78% of victims of adult abuse were female, 11% male, and in 11% of cases the gender of the young person was not given. These reports were nearly equally split between primary (45%) and secondary (55%) age children. In all of these instances, the abuse was perpetrated by an unknown adult, 89% by an unknown adult male and 11% by an adult where the gender was unknown. The majority (78%) of this type of abuse took place in private messages, most commonly on Instagram (44%), followed by Facebook (22%), Snapchat (12%), YouTube (11%) and Other platforms (11%). In a large proportion of these incidents (67%), the professional reported that the young person had been very distressed, although no longer term

mental health impacts (e.g. self-harming) were outlined. Encouragingly, in 100% of these cases, the victim disclosed to the professional within days of the incident taking place. Less encouragingly, in 44% of cases, this type of abuse had happened to the young person before, or there were existing safeguarding concerns. Looked after children were also significantly over represented in this sample (33%). Professionals contacting the helpline largely displayed appropriate levels of concern and could be seen to prioritise the young person's wellbeing, safeguarding and prevention of further abuse. However, in 33% of cases, the young person's care givers were described as unsupportive or non-co-operative, with many professionals seeking help from POSH on how to better engage them. The helpline was able to offer advice on this, alongside referring clients to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP, 56%), the police (44%), the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF, 11%) and local authorities (11%) for further support.



## 'SEXTING'

This category covers the sharing of intimate images between young people (under 18s). Although 'sexting' (or Youth Produced Sexual Imagery (YPSI)) can, and often is, consensual, the cases deal with by the helpline largely involved incidents where images had been disseminated further without consent. **In 100% of these instances, victims of non-consensual image sharing were female in the secondary age group.** 60% of victims were described as extremely distressed at having had their images shared, having reporting either suicidal ideation or self-harm. **The majority of perpetrators (80%) were other young people who were known to the victims (e.g. ex-partners or friends).** The remaining 20% were also young people, but in these instances were unknown, often as a result of images being shared over and over. **In 40% of these cases, an impersonation account was used to disseminate material.** 40% of these incidents occurred on Instagram, with a further 40% on Snapchat. The remaining 20% took place on Other platforms.

Worryingly, the responses of professionals to these types of incidents were not as thorough or

appropriate as they were for the types of adult abuse discussed above. Professionals were much less focused on the wellbeing and safeguarding of the young girl involved, and were much more focused on school reputation and behavioural prevention (of victim not perpetrator), with many displaying victim-blaming attitudes. **As a potential outcome of these types of victim-blaming attitudes, in the majority of cases (60%), non-consensual image sharing had been going on for weeks before it was disclosed to a professional, as opposed to days, as seen in incidents of adult abuse.** Concerns for school reputation in sexting incidents appeared to result in an overall reluctance, on the behalf of the professional, to contact law enforcement, a reluctance which was often exacerbated by the fact that the perpetrator was also a student at the same school. Where relevant, POSH attempted to respond to this oversight by encouraging professionals to make use of law enforcement services such as the police and the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF). An additional role played by helpline practitioners in these types of cases was to provide emotional support and reassurance to professionals, including advising them on how to best care for all young people involved.

“  
**THE MAJORITY OF PERPETRATORS (80%) WERE OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WERE KNOWN TO THE VICTIMS (E.G. EX-PARTNERS OR FRIENDS)**  
 ”

## INAPPROPRIATE USE

This category covers a range of incidents including young people looking at harmful content online (e.g. pornography, violent content or terrorism content) and/or showing this type of content to others. It also includes inappropriate app use (e.g. dating sites or gambling apps), self-generated indecent images or videos (often for a 'joke' (e.g. silly nude dancing)), and sending this type of content to other young people. These incidents have been grouped together as what they have in common is use of the internet in a way which is age-inappropriate, often lacking in awareness and without malicious intent, yet simultaneously harmful (to self and/or others), either emotionally, psychologically or legally. **In 70% of these cases, students were male and 60% were described as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).** These incidents were equally split between primary and secondary age children and, in 80% of cases, a previous similar incident had been recorded. Inappropriate use happened most commonly on YouTube or across the web (both 30%), followed by Instagram (20%) and Other platforms (20%).

Professionals reporting these incidents overwhelmingly displayed appropriate responses and sought advice on management, safeguarding and discipline. They did, however, also outline a degree of frustration in handling cases of inappropriate use, particularly so in instances where it was ongoing or recurring. **The lack of official training and guidance around how to manage inappropriate use, particular in relation to SEND young people, was also reported. Concerns were also expressed over the potentially disruptive nature of these types of instances on the learning of other young people within the classroom setting.** Finally, although 60% of professionals described care-givers being involved in managing inappropriate use, frustration was often further compounded by care-givers who were uncooperative towards behavioural management plans. In responding to these types of cases POSH offered advice on age appropriate websites and content, directed professionals to resources and training and recommended contact with the local authority where necessary.

“  
**IN 70% OF THESE CASES, STUDENTS WERE MALE AND 60% WERE DESCRIBED AS HAVING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES**  
 ”

## CASES INVOLVING PROFESSIONALS

Cases involving professionals (47% of total complex cases sampled) could be further categorised into two identifiable types: (1) bullying and harassment and (2) reputational issue. Figure 17 shows proportion of professionals' issues by type.

### BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

This category theoretically would cover all types of bullying targeted towards professionals, on any online platform, whether public or private. In reality, all of these cases involved public anonymous meme pages where school students were encouraged to view, submit and comment on humiliating memes of multiple teachers within the same school. The memes on the pages were often created out of photos or videos of professionals which had been taken or used without their consent. These pages commonly used the school's name and logo, with the school culture itself also being open to comment and critique. These types of pages were overwhelmingly hosted on Instagram (81%), with a smaller proportion taking the form of a YouTube channel (19%). This type of issue was often recurring, with 52% of professionals reporting having dealt with the same or similar type of page in previous months and years.

At times, this type of bullying was clearly intended to be light-hearted, however, at others times it was more serious in nature. For example, 19% of these incidents contained allegations of abuse and/or paedophilia, a further 19% posed a safeguarding risk to the professional in question (largely via the exposure of private information) and 15% contained an element of hate-speech (either racism or homophobia). Significantly, whether or not these pages were intended to be light-hearted or serious, the professionals targeted nearly always reported distress, humiliation and fear regarding the consequences to their reputation. As a result, a high proportion (29%) of professionals reported having to seek out psychological support or take a leave of absence. Notably, only teachers and other school staff reported this type of issue; it

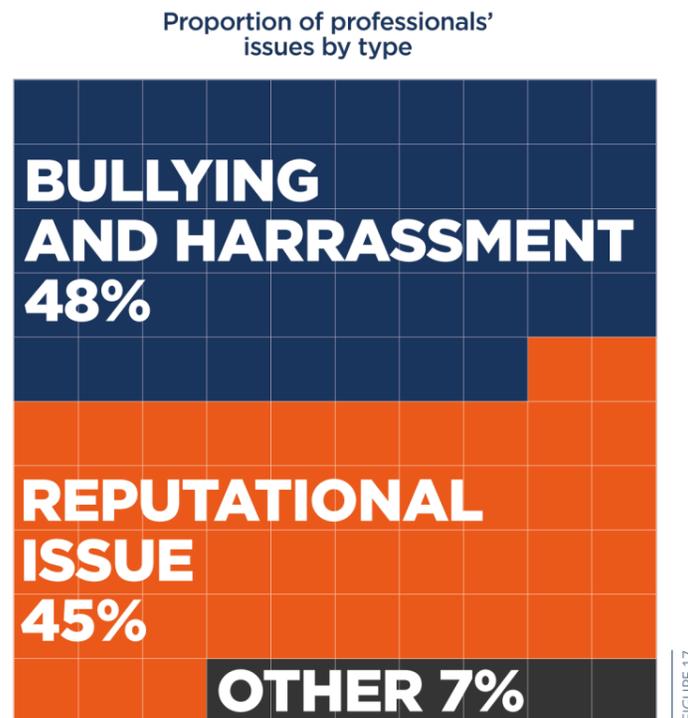


FIGURE 17

was not experienced by other professionals who made use of the helpline (e.g. police, foster and adoption carers, youth club leaders, volunteers, sports coaches, and medical practitioners). Unlike those contacting the helpline for help with young person's issues, the majority of these types of reports came from males (57%). This can be seen as representative of the fact that male professionals were almost as likely as female to be victims of these incidents (20% male, 23% female, 57% mixed gender victims), with accusations of abuse and paedophilia often playing a part in the bullying of male staff.

When contacting the helpline, professionals overwhelmingly requested help with removing these types of pages. Prior to contacting the helpline, professionals had, in 81% of cases, submitted an industry report requesting removal, which had been unsuccessful. The reason for this high percentage of unsuccessful reports is complex but was often related to professionals having difficulty navigating industry reporting forms, or submitting reports down incorrect

routes. The helpline was often able to resolve these complications, either by directing professionals to the correct reporting routes or intervening to escalate content to industry directly.

### REPUTATIONAL ISSUES

Whilst, as discussed above, reputation was a concern for victims of bullying and harassment, this category covers more explicit reputational issues including serious allegations of abuse (25% of these cases), alongside parental complaints and negative school and staff reviews (a combined 75% of cases). Those making the complaints were largely current parents (60%), followed by current students (15%), ex-parents (10%), other professionals (10%), unknown individuals (10%) and ex-staff members (5%). Complaints were overwhelmingly public (90%), as opposed to private (10%) and were mostly hosted on Facebook (65%), followed by YouTube (10%), Google reviews (10%), Twitter (5%), WhatsApp (5%), ratemyteacher (5%) and urbandictionary (5%) (Figure 18). Although these types of incidents were primarily facilitated by online platforms, oftentimes they went beyond the sites just listed; 25% of cases contained an element of ongoing harassment, both on and offline and 10% of cases involved offline threats. Complaints and allegations were disproportionately targeted at female professionals (40% as opposed to 20% male and 40% whole school targeted), and females were more likely to contact the helpline with these

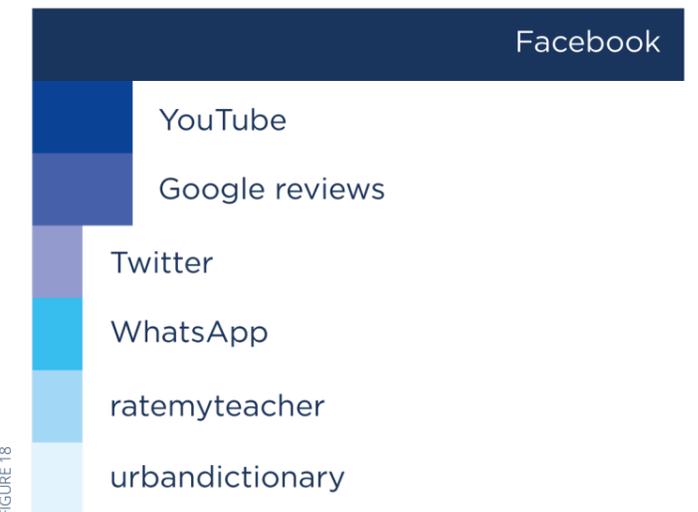


FIGURE 18

issues (65% as opposed to 35% male) (Figure 19). Significantly, these types of incidents almost always took a high psychological and emotional toll on professionals. Greater detrimental mental health impacts were correlated with little support being offered by the school, a single professional being targeted (as opposed to the whole school), the seriousness of the allegation and the degree of publicity the complaint or allegation had attracted. Lesser mental health impacts were primarily associated with emotional support being offered through the school network.

Before contacting the helpline, professionals had sought help from a number of other sources in attempts to resolve the situation. This included the in-school complaints handling system (40%), local authority (25%), unsuccessful industry report (20%), police (15%), Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 15%) and teachers' union (5%). The ways in which the helpline responded to these incidents largely depended on their nature. Often content could not be actioned for removal unless it constituted a direct threat or harassment. Where serious allegations were made, the helpline was unable to action content for removal prior to a full independent investigation taking place. Notably, when being informed of the need for an independent investigation, professionals often responded to helpline practitioners with hostility and frustration.

The primary value of the POSH service in responding to these types of incidents lay in providing emotional support, alongside empowering professionals by explaining the full range of options and outcomes available. Onward referrals were also made to the police (45% of cases), local authorities (25% of cases) and teachers' union (10% cases).

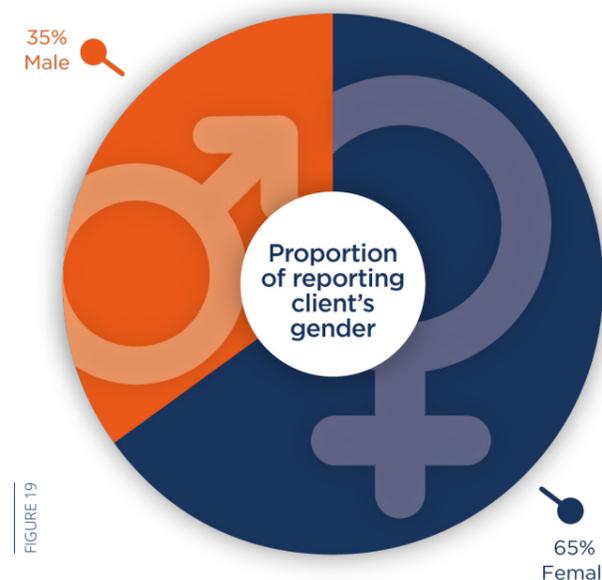


FIGURE 19

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### NOT ONLY DOES POSH ASSIST WITH INDIVIDUAL CLIENT ISSUES, IT ALSO RESPONDS TO TRENDS OBSERVED MORE BROADLY IN EDUCATIONAL AND CARE SETTINGS

#### THE VALUE OF THE SERVICE

The value of POSH lies in its unique ability to provide an extremely broad range of support. It tackles issues affecting both young people and the professionals who care for them. As is evident from this report, POSH practitioners deal with a wide variety of online safety and safeguarding issues, alongside providing advice, signposting and resources. Although dealing with a broad scope of issues, POSH practitioners respond to clients on an individual basis; they are able to tailor the support offered to the specific needs of the client. Alongside directly addressing

the issue presented by the client, the service also anticipates additional needs and goes above and beyond to respond to them, as evidenced through the analysis of assistance channels provided by the helpline. In addition to being demonstrated in quantitative analysis, the unique nature of POSH, the attitude and skills of practitioners and the breadth of knowledge offered were emphasised in qualitative feedback from clients. **Not only does POSH assist with individual client issues, it also responds to trends observed more broadly in educational and care settings. This is clearly evidenced though the spikes in cases surrounding the 'Momo' trend, which demonstrate the ability of POSH practitioners to rapidly take on this additional workload when it arises.**

#### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Given the evident value of the helpline, there is an **urgent need to address issues with resourcing.** As discussed in the findings of this report, cases dealt with by the helpline have marginally declined in the last few years due to a lack of resources available for outreach and awareness raising. If POSH is to continue offering the essential support it does then an increase in **a funding commitment is desperately needed to replace the EU funding that currently supports the service. Additionally further resources are required to ensure the entire workforce can access this support.** As evidenced in the demographic data presented in this report, there is clear scope for targeted awareness raising to take place in particular areas where contact to the helpline is identified as low (for example the East of England and Yorkshire and The Humber). Further to this, and given the increasing proportion of cases which dealt with issues affecting professionals, there is additional scope to engage in outreach targeted at this demographic (e.g. at conferences and seminars) so as to promote this, often overlooked, aspect of the service. Any additional future funding secured for the helpline could be effectively applied towards these two areas of service development.

#### RESPONDING TO COMPLEX CASES

Complex cases fell into two types: those impacting young people and those impacting professionals. Each could further be broken down into sub-types, all of which have implications regarding both the type of support POSH should be providing to clients and, more broadly, in terms of policy, research and resource provision.

The first type of young persons' issue involved peer to peer abuse. This took place in both private communications and on public platforms, it most commonly affected secondary age females and high levels of mental health impacts were

reported. All of these observations can be seen to conform to trends within existing research wherein the varied, gendered and detrimental impacts of cyberbullying are observed (Ditch the Label, 2018; Ringrose, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012; Smith et al, 2008; The Children's Society & YoungMinds, 2018). As was also observed, the response of professionals to peer on peer abuse varied greatly depending on the public vs private nature of the incident; on the whole private incidents were treated with greater seriousness.



**The findings of this report indicate that there is a need for the Department for Education to develop a comparable document to cover these broader aspects of abuse, upon which POSH would be ideally placed to consult**

Given, however, the high levels of distress experienced by young people of both types of cyberbullying, alongside the recurrent nature of these types of reports (which was particularly apparent where cyberbullying was public), there is evidently a need for professionals to respond more evenly to these two types of issues. In practice this would entail offering pastoral care to victims of all types of cyberbullying, and addressing the behaviour behind such incidents, which might include tackling the gendered aspects of peer to peer abuse. Given that pastoral care already takes up a significant proportion of school staff time, however, the requirement to better address all types of cyberbullying would, crucially, necessitate the school being provided with appropriate support and resources. Whilst the Department for Education already has comprehensive guidance on dealing with peer to peer sexual harassment within schools (Department for Education, 2017), less explicit guidance exists which covers the broader range of peer to peer abuse discussed in this report. **The findings of this report indicate that there is a need for the Department for Education to develop a comparable document to cover these broader aspects of abuse, upon which POSH would be ideally placed to consult.**

A further point of concern to emerge from the observation of peer to peer abuse was the high

proportion of these incidents which took place on Instagram. Again, this can be seen to support existing research wherein the relatively high prevalence of cyberbullying on this platform is noted (Ditch the Label, 2018). Whilst, as outlined above, there are steps schools can take to tackle issues of peer to peer abuse, ultimately, social media platforms have a greater role to play in addressing this type of content. **Platforms such as Instagram have, in recent years, largely in response to high profile incidents, altered their policies so as to be more proactive in removing particular types of content (e.g. self-harm content). A similar shift needs to occur regarding cyberbullying content, particularly that which is public, explicitly abusive and thus available for proactive moderation.**

sample analysed, it could also suggest that young people with existing vulnerabilities are more likely to be targeted by abusers, again conforming to more widespread knowledge regarding the nature of grooming (IWF, 2019; NSPCC, 2020; Reeves, Soultar, Green, & Crowther, 2017). Finally, although it is positive that grooming is being rapidly disclosed to professionals, who then seek further advice from services such as POSH, the overall proportion of these types of cases, as dealt with by the helpline, is still comparatively low. This may represent an overall lack of grooming disclosures or, alternatively, an unwillingness of professionals to contact POSH about these incidents. Either explanation could be an important site of intervention for the helpline.

often displayed victim-blaming attitudes (Eaton, 2019). **The disproportionately high level of distress, suicidal ideation and self-harm described in relation to these cases could be interpreted as a consequence of victim-blaming attitudes, either as specific responses from professionals, or as part of the wider cultural discourse surrounding teenaged girls and image sharing (Mishna et al., 2018; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013).** Although this is an issue which extends beyond the school environment, there is evidently scope for education and awareness raising regarding how best to respond to sexting incidents in a way which is gender sensitive and informed. Ideally, this would include **training professionals on how victim-blaming can operate insidiously so as to negatively inform responses to girls who have experienced abuse online.** Given the prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes and the harms which result from them, it is additionally **recommended that education designed to counter victim-blaming attitudes be prioritised for inclusion in upcoming compulsory sex and relationships education.**

An additional area of concern identified in the response to sexting incidents was the reluctance, on the behalf of the professional, to contact law enforcement. Whilst, technically, the taking, making or sharing of indecent images of a minor is against the law, in practice, sexting incidents between minors are rarely criminalised (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2016). This, however, does not disregard the fact that, as is evidenced in this sample, consent has been violated and, thus, police involvement should still have been offered to sexting victims as an additional area of support. A final area of concern emerging from these types of cases, similar to the discussion regarding adult abuse, was the relatively low overall proportion of these types of cases, as dealt with by the helpline. Again, this could represent a lack of young person disclosure or an unwillingness of professionals to contact POSH, either of which could be a further area of potential intervention for the helpline.

The final young persons' issue involved a wide range of inappropriate internet use which, whilst often involving a lack of awareness, still held the potential for harm. The majority of the young people involved in inappropriate use were male. Students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were also overrepresented, a finding which conforms to trends observed elsewhere (Zhang & Livingstone, 2019). One of the key issues to emerge from observation of these types of cases was the lack of official training and guidance on how to manage inappropriate use,

“““  
It is recommended that the types, nature and methods used to access independent sites hosting harmful and illegal content are included in the scope of the government online harms legislation

“““  
**IT IS ADDITIONALLY RECOMMENDED THAT EDUCATION DESIGNED TO COUNTER VICTIM-BLAMING ATTITUDES BE PRIORITISED FOR INCLUSION IN UPCOMING COMPULSORY SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION**

The second type of young persons' issue concerned adult abuse, largely in the form of grooming by an unknown adult male over private social media communications. Victims of this type of abuse were, again, most likely to be female and an almost equal split between the primary and secondary age groups was observed. The professionals responding to these types of cases are to be commended in that they almost always displayed appropriate levels of concern and care. Despite, however, the rapid and positive handling of these cases by professionals, there are a number of elements of concern regarding these types of cases. The changing nature of grooming (e.g. the soliciting of self-produced content) alongside the high proportion of younger age groups being targeted are both concerns which conform to trends observed more broadly (IWF, 2019; Smith, 2012). Alongside this, the fact that looked after children, previous victims of adult abuse and children with existing safeguarding issues are over represented in this sample is worrying. Although this may represent reporting bias within the

The third type of young persons' issue involved the non-consensual sharing of intimate images between young people ('sexting'). In 100% of these instances victims were female in the secondary age group and a high proportion of detrimental mental health impacts were observed. **The gendered nature of intimate image abuse, both in terms of victimisation and perpetration, alongside the ways in which this intersects with its harms, is consistently observed within existing research (Maddocks, 2018; McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012; Sharratt, 2019).** Although perpetrators of non-consensual image sharing were often known to victims, in a significant proportion of these cases, an impersonation account was used to disseminate material. Again, this conforms to data gathered elsewhere on the prevalence of impersonation accounts being used for the purposes of abuse and harassment, particularly against women and girls (Sharratt, 2020).

As was also observed within these types of incidents, the professionals responding to them

especially given its recurrent nature and its disruptive potential. This observation represents a clear need for greater guidance and support, alongside a range of resources, to be made available regarding inappropriate use. Fortunately, POSH has recently received Home Office funding to design such a resource (left), which is available here: <https://www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety/so-you-got-naked-online-guide-for-young-people/>



The prevalence of inappropriate use recorded in this report conforms to observations drawn more widely regarding the ease of access to, and lack of regulation surrounding, harmful online content (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2020). This indicates that there is an evident need for this issue to be addressed beyond simply the school environment. Given this, **it is recommended that the types, nature and methods used to access independent sites hosting harmful and illegal content are included in the scope of the government online harms legislation (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2020).** POSH and its sister service Report Harmful Content (RHC) collate data on these types of sites, beyond that which is described in this report, meaning that they would be ideally placed to consult upon this emerging policy.

Alongside contacting the helpline with issues affecting young people, professionals also sought help, in almost equal numbers, regarding their own incidents. This high proportion appears to represent a marked increase from previous years, in addition to being in alignment with trends reported elsewhere, where the ever growing abuse of professionals is described (Busby, 2019;

Department for Education, 2014; The Key, 2016; NASUWT, 2018).

The first issue affecting professionals was bullying and harassment, almost all of which involved public anonymous meme pages, created by students, and overwhelmingly hosted on Instagram. Professionals often experienced difficulties in removing this type of content, due to either unfamiliarity with reporting streams or unresponsiveness of industry. Whilst, in responding to these cases, POSH was able to offer essential support regarding the removal of content, there is clearly scope for educating and empowering teachers to navigate these removal processes themselves. More importantly, there is a role to be played by industry platforms, either in proactively removing these types of pages, or responding more efficiently to reports made by professionals, thus reducing the need for the intervention of POSH. As with the recommendations outlined previously regarding peer on peer abuse, **given the high prevalence of bullying and harassment on Instagram, there is a heightened need for particular solutions to be developed upon this platform.**

What was additionally notable about bullying and harassment cases was the fact that, in the data analysed, this abuse was exclusively targeted at teachers and other school staff. This appears to indicate a particular vulnerability experienced by teachers and school staff, undoubtedly exacerbated by their public role and the ways in which they are required to enforce school rules and boundaries. **Despite this role, bullying by students should not be regarded as an occupational hazard for teachers although, unfortunately, research suggests that this is increasingly becoming the case (Busby, 2019; Department for Education, 2014; The Key, 2016; NASUWT, 2018). Evidently, there is scope for work to be done, both to target this type of behaviour and to support teachers in dealing with bullying incidents and their repercussions.** This is especially so given, as described in this report, a high proportion of teachers have to seek independent psychological support as a result of student bullying.

The second issue affecting professionals concerned reputational issues, either where serious allegations of abuse or more general parent complaints and reviews had been made. Just as with bullying and harassment from students, these types of

incidents overwhelmingly took a high psychological and emotional toll on professionals, again conforming to trends more broadly observed (Busby, 2019; The Key, 2016). Encouragingly, the findings discussed in this report indicate that detrimental psychological impacts aren't necessarily inevitable. As was noted, impacts could be cushioned by emotional support being offered through the school network. This represents an important site of intervention for educational environments in terms of supporting staff and safeguarding against potential burnout further down the line.

As discussed in the findings of this report, the inability of POSH to action content containing allegations of abuse — without an independent investigation having been carried out — was met with frustration and hostility by professionals. In order to avoid these types of conflicts in future interactions, it would be useful for the Department for Education to produce centralised guidance on responding to allegations of abuse. Although some such guidance was produced in 2012, in practice, schools are directed to local authority guidance, which can vary from county to county (Department for Education, 2012). **It is recommended that any updated centralised guidance include details of the need for independent investigations when allegations appear on social media; this could then be shared by POSH with professionals, avoiding hostility and confusion. Ideally, any updated guidance would also include recommendations that all children's workforce professionals receive**

“ Given the high prevalence of bullying and harassment on Instagram, there is a heightened need for particular solutions to be developed upon this platform ”

**training to be equipped to deal with allegations of abuse online, thus mitigating the need for POSH involvement.**

Whilst, as discussed in the findings, there was never a one sized solution to dealing with reputational issues, given their complex and varied nature, there does appear to be scope for greater support to be offered to professionals in relation to these types of cases, not only from within the school itself but also via the local authorities. There is also scope to raise awareness amongst professionals of the ways in which services such as the police, teachers' unions and Report Harmful Content (an additional service provided by SWGfL) can assist with reputational issues.

A final issue to note in relation to professionals' issues was the gender disparities observed, both regarding patterns of online victimisation and contact to the helpline. **As was noted, whilst male professionals were uniquely vulnerable to accusations of paedophilia, female staff members were equally likely to be victims of student bullying, and more likely to be the victims of reputational complaints.** Further to this, whilst male staff members commonly contacted the helpline for assistance when they were targets of abuse, **it was overwhelmingly female members of staff who contacted the helpline about cases involving young people.** Although, as discussed in the top level statistics, there is an overall gender disparity in clients using the helpline, the fact that this gap further widens within cases involving the support of young people is indicative of the **higher burden of emotional labour placed upon female professionals when it comes to administering pastoral care**, as observed elsewhere in research (Hochschild, 1983; Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011; Simpson, 2004). When designing ways in which to support professionals within educational and care settings, it is recommended that interventions include gender specific support which addresses these patterns.

## CONCLUSION

This report has presented results from mixed-methods research carried out on cases dealt with on POSH in 2019. It has discussed top level statistics, alongside exploring complex cases in more depth. The trends and cases identified in this report were discussed in depth and recommendations were made regarding future service provision, both for POSH and associated services and industries.

One limitation of this research was that, although it was able to collect data on gender, and incorporate this into the analysis regarding both young persons and professionals, there was limited scope to explore how other structural oppressions, including race, sexuality, gender identity and disability, might add additional layers of impact to the types of cases discussed. This limitation was largely due to restrictions in the type of data available in the POSH database, as practitioners do not routinely collect this type of information, only recording it where mentioned. Research tells us that, alongside gender, other identity markers also impact issues encountered within professional and educational environments and, towards this end, future POSH research might seek to supplement analysis of helpline data with in depth, qualitative interviewing.

A further limitation of this research concerns its ability to be more widely extrapolated to professional and educational environments. This can be seen as related to the potentially skewed sample of cases analysed; analysis was restricted solely to issues with which professionals chose to contact the helpline, as opposed to the full range of issues encountered by members of the children's workforce. As a reflection of this, the relatively low incidents of particular types of issues was highlighted as a point of interest within this report. Evidently, there appears to be similar scope for triangulating future helpline research with other data collection methods so as to investigate these absences.

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