

# Professionals Online Safety Helpline Analysis 2022-2023

## Exploring the Issues Professionals Face in Tackling Online Harms

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline<sup>1</sup> has been in operation for 12 years and is part of the UK Safer Internet Centre, the helpline is operated by SWGfL.

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline offers free support to professionals and volunteers dealing with online safety issues related to themselves or young people in their care, providing advice, signposting, and mediation.

- The analysis presented in this report covers a one-year period, from 01/09/2022 to 31/08/2023, drawing from 2,678 cases. Data is drawn from emails, phone calls, and practitioner-recorded discussions.
- Geographical analysis reveals the helpline's nationwide usage across England, with a high proportion of enquiries coming from the South East and Midlands. It was also used across other regions in the United Kingdom. Enquiries follow the school year pattern, with increased activity during term time.
- The majority of enquiries (2,455) were made through electronic communication. The helpline catered to a variety of professionals, with teachers being the most common. The helpline also supported charity workers, local authorities, and other professionals working with children.
- Most enquiries (2,157) came from secondary school settings, reflecting concerns arising as young people engaged more with online services. However, some primary settings and non-school-related enquiries also made use of the support offered by the helpline.
- The analysis highlights a significant focus on concerns related to TikTok as the platform where most content of concern was reported. This highlights a move from Instagram being the predominant platform in previous evaluations.
- The helpline actively referred 68.8% of cases to platforms for potential takedown. The top five enquiry categories, ranked by volume, were online reputation, cyberbullying, potentially harmful content, other, and general enquiries.
- This analysis highlights the need for further development of training opportunities and digital literacy for professionals dealing with online safety issues.
- The evidence suggests that online safety issues are part of daily professional practice for many schools, necessitating a collaborative approach. National coordination is highlighted as essential for effectively tackling online harms.

## INTRODUCTION

*"We are looking for help in dealing with two TikTok accounts created by the parents of two of our students.*

*Both accounts contain a lot of content we would consider to be defamatory to both the school and professionals working in our setting. While we have tried to speak with the parents to understand their issues and to have the content removed, there is still content available to anyone online.*

*Furthermore, in the last few days there has been more content added which are making serious allegations that are entirely unfounded about the school, and the content is starting to be shared on other platforms. We have serious concerns about the wellbeing of staff and their families implicated in this content.*

*We are seeking legal advice but have heard that your service is very successful at supporting schools with this sort of incident and having content taken down."*

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline is a free service for professionals and volunteers working with children and young people. It provides signposting, advice, and mediation to resolve online safety issues that staff may face about themselves, such as protecting professional identity and online harassment or problems affecting young people, for example, cyberbullying or sexting issues. The above quotation is an illustration, based upon a real case, of the sort of enquiries helpline practitioners deal with on a daily basis.

The helpline is open Monday to Friday between 10 am and 4 pm, and aims to respond to calls within three hours where possible. The helpline has exceptional contacts with industry partners, which enables practitioners to report issues to a real person and ensures platforms can keep helpline practitioners up to date with their policies and tools for reporting content.

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## ANALYSIS

The analysis of the helpline between 2022 and 2023 is drawn from the cases recorded over a year and considers 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
- The breadth of incidents the helpline supports

The analysis is based upon 2,678 cases taken between 01/09/2022 and 31/08/2023.

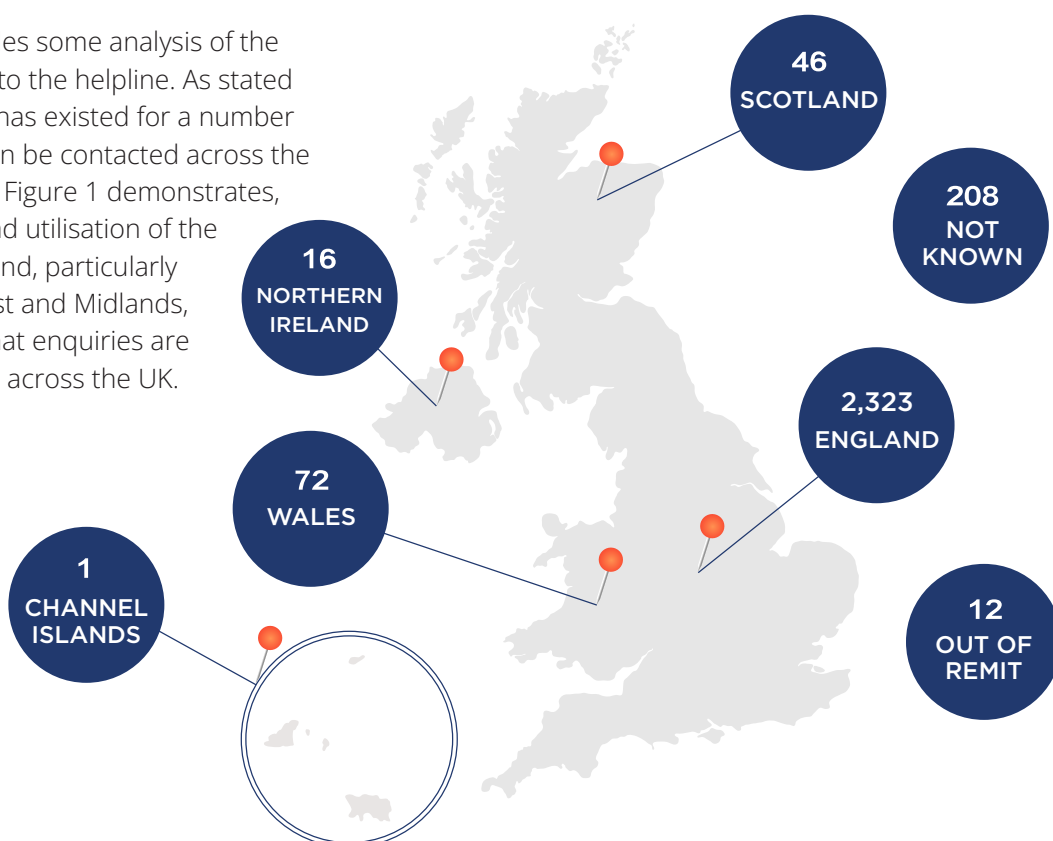
The case recording system details the whole dialogue of each enquiry. The majority of enquiries originate through emails to the Professionals Online Safety Helpline. However, the helpline also provides a phone service which supports a minority of cases and is recorded by the practitioner.

As part of the interaction between practitioner and enquirer, there will often be a record made of location and profession, and the practitioner will categorise an enquiry based on regular incidents that the helpline supports. An enquiry may fit multiple categories, and there may be some overlap. Nevertheless, it is a valuable way to measure the more common types of enquiries and document where professionals need the most support. Appendix A details the categories alongside descriptions of the sorts of enquiries that would fit into a given category, drawn from actual case examples.

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## TOP-LEVEL ANALYSIS

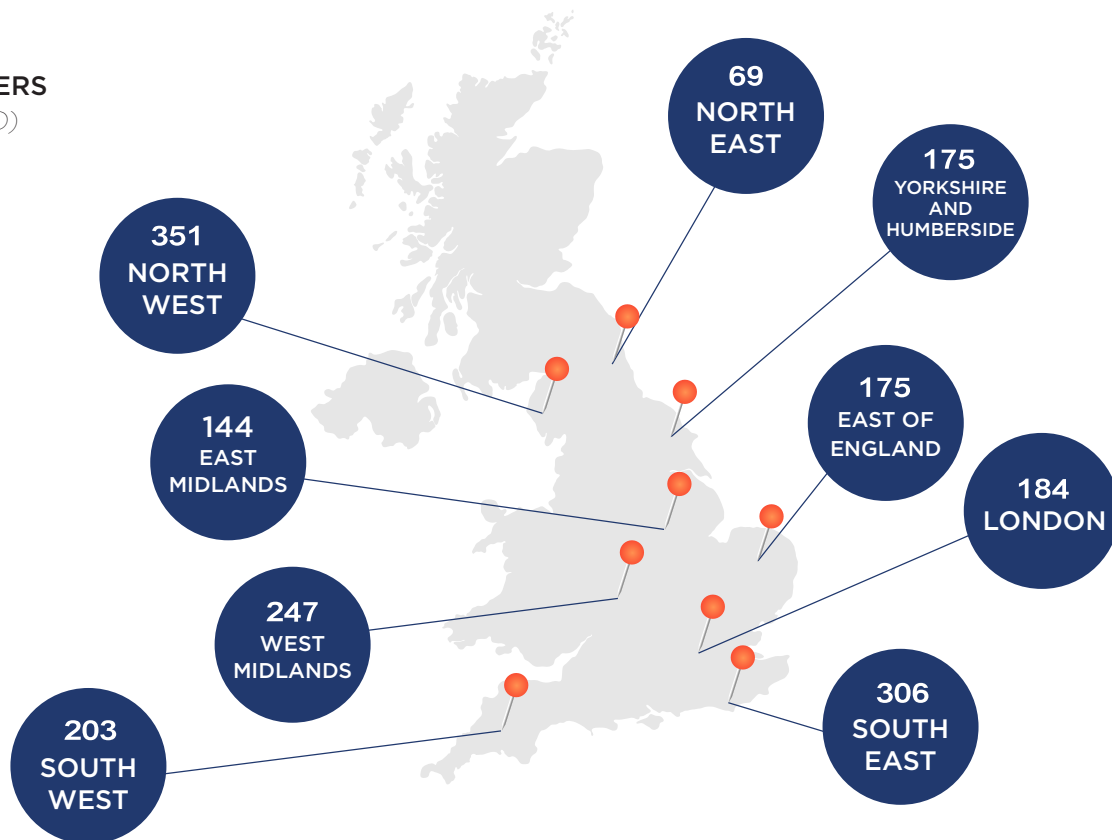
The following provides some analysis of the nature of enquiries to the helpline. As stated above, the helpline has existed for a number of years now and can be contacted across the United Kingdom. As Figure 1 demonstrates, there is a widespread utilisation of the service across England, particularly within the South East and Midlands, but it also reveals that enquiries are being received from across the UK.



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**FIGURE 1 -  
LOCATION  
OF ENQUIRERS**

**FIGURE 1 -  
LOCATION  
OF ENQUIRERS**  
(CONTINUED)



Enquirers will generally email the service, with 2,455 enquiries taking this route. The service also deals with a small number of phone calls (70), where practitioners record the nature of the enquiry during and after the call. The online nature of most enquiries means that the service can be contacted outside of staffed hours, and practitioners will endeavour to get back to all enquiries within three working hours.

We can see from Table 1 that most enquiries are drawn from involving children, and we can see that the vast majority of professionals who contact the helpline are teachers. However, a broad range of other professionals contact the helpline for help and support – for example, in the case of charity workers or local authorities, the enquiries usually relate to a professional working in a school or social care setting. There were a small number of cases directly from young people this year, and while the helpline practitioners will provide guidance in these cases, they will also signpost to other services, such as Childline, for further support. A similar practice occurs when supporting parents, given that the remit of the helpline is to support professionals.

**“ The vast majority of professionals who contact the helpline are teachers. ”**

**TABLE 1 - TYPE OF ENQUIRER**

Teacher	<b>2,024</b>	Local Authority	<b>15</b>
Other School Staff	<b>89</b>	Charity/NGO	<b>13</b>
General Public	<b>77</b>	Police	<b>7</b>
DSL	<b>71</b>	Unknown	<b>7</b>
ICT school support	<b>57</b>	Social Worker	<b>6</b>
Head Teacher	<b>42</b>	Child (12-18)	<b>5</b>
Assistant/Deputy headteacher	<b>33</b>	Medical Staff	<b>5</b>
MAT employee	<b>23</b>	Social Care	<b>5</b>
Other	<b>20</b>	Out of Remit	<b>4</b>
Parent	<b>17</b>	Foster Carer	<b>2</b>

Table 2 further breaks down enquiries from educational institutions and illustrates that the vast majority of enquiries come from secondary settings. As young people get older and engage more with online services, more concerns around their experiences and their behaviour (in the event of, for example, posting abusive content about a professional or their school) will arise. However, the service is used in some primary settings, too.

**TABLE 2 - INSTITUTIONAL TYPE**

Secondary	<b>2,157</b>
Primary	<b>79</b>
Further Education/College	<b>15</b>
Early Years	<b>3</b>

**FIGURE 2 - MONTHLY BREAKDOWN OF ENQUIRIES TO THE PROFESSIONALS ONLINE SAFETY HELPLINE**

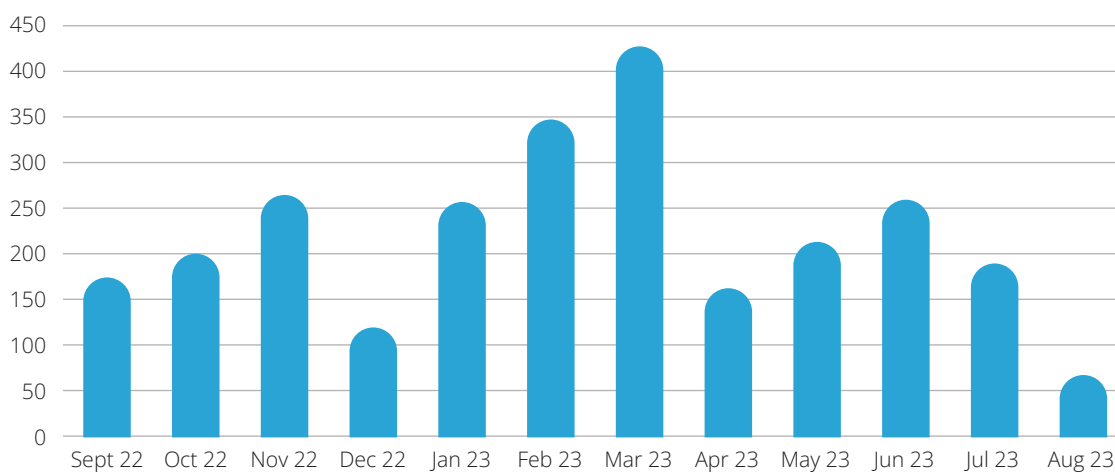


Figure 2 shows the volume of enquiries to the helpline per month. Unsurprisingly, it follows the familiar pattern of the school year, with the helpline being busier during term time.

The greater volume of enquiries in the spring term is of interest, given the large volume of media attention during March 2023 around “TikTok riots” in schools<sup>2</sup>, which reflects concerns across the education sector about the use of social media platforms to host content related to behaviour in schools. These incidents coincide with a number of cases specifically referring to these incidents, with enquirers requesting help to get content taken down.

Regarding the location of content that caused concern (and was often requested to be removed), it is no surprise, as summarised in Table 3, that the majority was hosted on social media platforms.

**TABLE 3 - TYPE OF PLATFORM HOSTING CONCERNING CONTENT REPORTED TO THE PROFESSIONALS ONLINE SAFETY HELPLINE.**

Social Networks	<b>1,656</b>
Websites	<b>33</b>
Out of Remit	<b>16</b>
Emails	<b>11</b>
Apps	<b>5</b>
Unknown	<b>5</b>
Mobile Device	<b>3</b>
Online Games	<b>3</b>
Peer-to-Peer	<b>2</b>
Chatrooms	<b>1</b>
Online Community/Forum	<b>1</b>

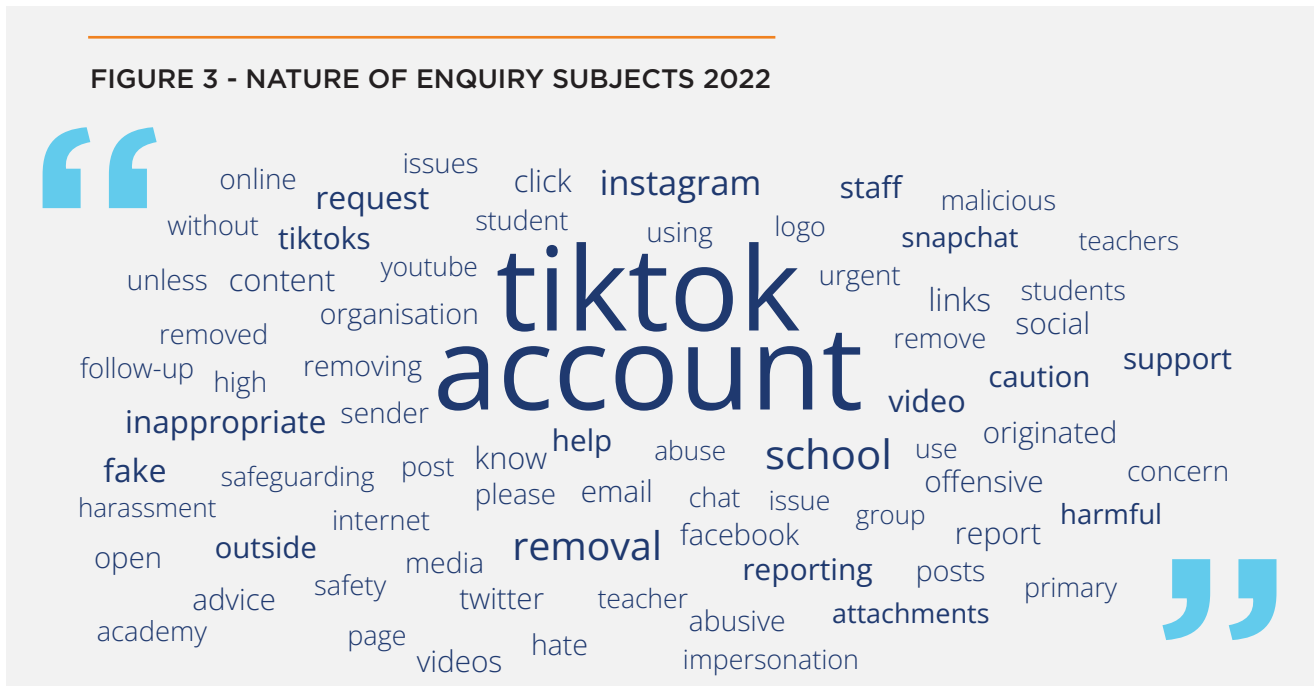
Of the social media platforms themselves, Table 4 demonstrates that the largest area of concern was content hosted on TikTok.

**TABLE 4 - SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS HOSTING CONCERNING CONTENT REPORTED TO THE PROFESSIONALS ONLINE SAFETY HELPLINE**

TikTok	<b>687</b>
Instagram	<b>88</b>
Snapchat	<b>41</b>
Facebook	<b>35</b>
Twitter	<b>11</b>



A further illustration of the prevalence of concerns around TikTok can be shown using a word cloud to capture the most common terms in the subject lines of email-based enquiries sent to the helpline. This is demonstrated in Figure 3:



Indeed, there is a very clear topic that represents most enquiries, and that is those that relate to the video platform TikTok. Table 5 reveals the top twenty words in the word frequency analysis, demonstrating the dominance of TikTok as the primary platform of concern by enquirers:

**TABLE 5 - TOP 20 WORDS IN EMAIL SUBJECT HEADINGS**

TikTok	<b>1,382</b>	Support	<b>74</b>
Account	<b>1,160</b>	Content	<b>73</b>
School	<b>250</b>	Videos	<b>71</b>
Removal	<b>224</b>	Email	<b>71</b>
Instagram	<b>162</b>	Report	<b>61</b>
Request	<b>92</b>	Caution	<b>61</b>
Inappropriate	<b>84</b>	Outside	<b>60</b>
Reporting	<b>81</b>	Originated	<b>59</b>
Video	<b>81</b>	Help	<b>58</b>
Fake	<b>80</b>	Staff	<b>54</b>

While this is similar in nature to the previous evaluation of the helpline<sup>3</sup>, it does show a marked difference from the 2021 evaluation<sup>4</sup> where Instagram was the predominant platform. This data demonstrates the changing use of platforms by young people and tallies with other analyses, such as OFCOM's 2023 Media Literacy report<sup>5</sup> which showed that whilst YouTube was the most popular platform for young people, TikTok was being used by over 50% of young people between the ages of 3 and 17.

Due to the working relationship that the Professionals Online Safety Helpline has with all major platforms, one of the most powerful types of support the helpline can provide is to report concerns directly to social media platforms to get content analysed. If community guidelines are breached, it can then be quickly taken down. Case descriptions show that in many cases, professionals had attempted to contact platforms themselves without much success, and going via the helpline often yielded better outcomes. In the cases presented this year, 68.8% of cases were referred to a platform to be considered for takedown.



**If community guidelines are breached, it can then be quickly taken down.**

A more detailed analysis of the nature of the enquiries can be drawn from the categorisation of calls recorded by practitioners. The table below shows the volume and percentage of cases tagged with each category and illustrates the nature of the calls received. Calls can be assigned to more than one category by the enquirer, and, in many cases, several are used. There can also be overlap between categories (for example, sexual harassment and grooming might cross over, as will hate speech networks and online reputation in some cases).

**TABLE 6 - NATURE OF ENQUIRIES RECEIVED BY THE HELPLINE**

Number of enquiries	Categorisation	% of overall enquiries
13	Child Sexual Exploitation	0.48543689
963	Cyberbullying	35.9596714
1	Data Privacy	0.0373413
2	e-Crime	0.0746826
3	Excessive Use	0.1120239
2	Gaming	0.0746826
52	General Enquiry	1.94174757
7	Grooming	0.2613891
6	Hate Speech	0.2240478
0	Love/Relationships/Sexuality	0
1	Media Enquiry	0.0373413
5	Media Literacy/Education	0.1867065
1,230	Online Reputation	45.9297984
122	Other	4.55563854
22	Out of Remit	0.82150859
1	Policy Enquiry	0.0373413
143	Potentially Harmful Content	5.33980583
2	Prank Calls	0.0746826
30	Sexting	1.12023898
14	Sextortion	0.52277819
19	Sexual Harassment	0.70948469
18	Technical Settings	0.67214339

If we rank the categories from highest to lowest, the top five are:

- Online Reputation (46%)
- Cyberbullying (36%)
- Potentially Harmful Content (5.3%)
- Other (4.6%)
- General Enquiry (1.9%)

Most enquiries relate to either online reputation (in almost half of cases) or cyberbullying. From one perspective, this is a positive thing – given that the helpline has been established to support professionals dealing with online safety issues, it is reassuring that the majority of help sought by professionals does not relate to potentially criminal activities (for example, grooming, harassment, hate speech and e-crime).

However, this is not to detract from the very real harm that can occur from both of the most prevalent categories. Again, the change in nature of enquiries when compared to 2020 helpline use is highlighted, where only 28% of calls were related to online reputation. Appendix A provides a brief overview of the nature of these kinds of enquiries.

In general, these enquiries will raise concerns about content that is generally produced by pupils at a school involving negative comments involving the school or members of staff. The level of concern can vary between enquiries, but what is clear from exploring the case documentation is that in many cases, the professionals asking for help are incredibly concerned about the content and will often raise questions about defamation and libel. While the legal thresholds for these accusations are quite high, it is fair that teachers feel personally and professionally attacked by some of this content. In several cases, professionals also raise concerns about wellbeing.

Cyberbullying, being the second highest categorisation, also follows a typical practice of content being hosted that will attack either a young person (in the majority) or a professional by name, and, of course, because of being available via social media platforms, is accessible to a wide audience. In some descriptions, there is also evidence that other stakeholders around the child, such as parents, might get involved in cyberbullying cases. While some cases might be considered “one-offs”, which can be dealt with in a straightforward manner with a takedown request from the helpline, some will comprise many pieces of content across multiple accounts, which may reappear after removal and have a more severe impact upon victims.

**“ It is reassuring that the majority of help sought by professionals does not relate to potentially criminal activities. ”**

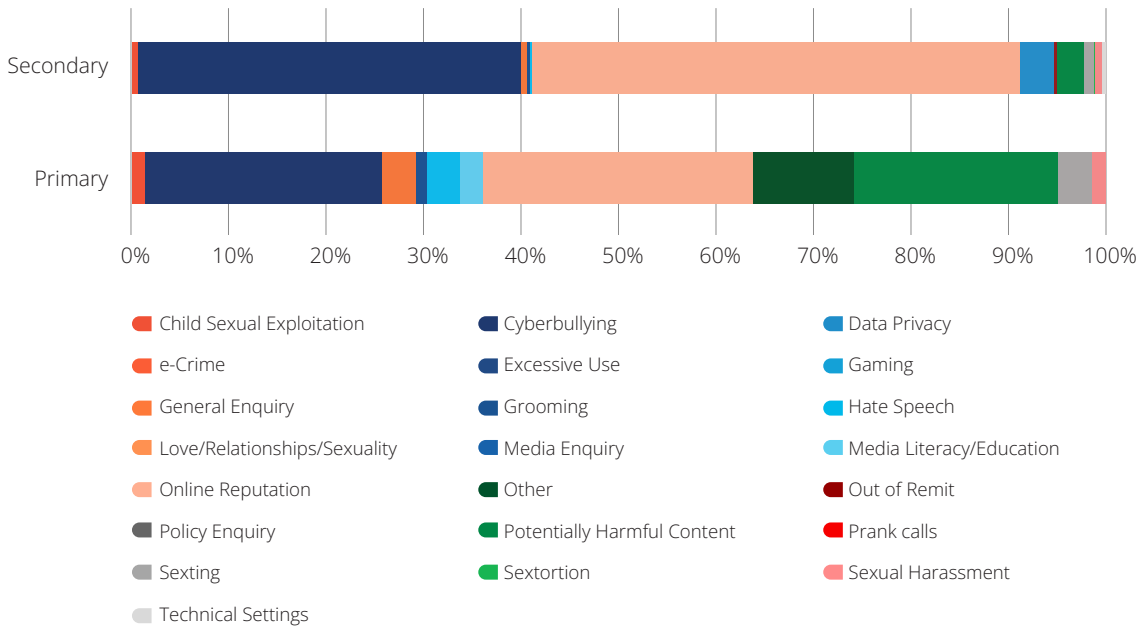
## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SETTINGS

As we have discussed above, enquirers can also be invited to state the setting in which they work, which in most cases is recorded, allowing a comparison between different settings. While there are far more cases in secondary schools (2,157) than primaries (79), it is a helpful

comparison to see whether those professionals in primary settings face different challenges to those in secondary institutions. Figure 4 shows that there is a far higher proportion of calls from primary settings related to concerns around potentially harmful content and hate speech (which can cross over with potentially harmful content). In secondary settings, there is an even more clear illustration that online reputation and cyberbullying are the prevalent issues professionals face.

“ Enquirers can also be invited to state the setting in which they work, and, in most cases, this is recorded.”

**FIGURE 4 - COMPARISON OF ENQUIRIES BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SETTINGS.**



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## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The volume of enquiries to the helpline provides an extremely effective lens into the online safety issues that professionals are asking for help with. While it is reassuring that the majority of cases do not meet concerns around potentially criminal activity, the large volume of cases regarding online reputation and cyberbullying should not simply be dismissed as low-level issues that have little impact. In both types of concern, there can be a lasting impact on individuals involved, and an analysis of helpline cases demonstrates that professionals are asking for help because they feel helpless to tackle these issues on their own. In many cases, the helpline has effectively liaised with platforms and had content that has breached community standards taken down. However, in some cases, some level of expectations management needs to be conducted by the helpline practitioners, particularly with differentiation of something that might be personally offensive whilst equally meeting no thresholds for removal.

There remains a need for further development of training opportunities and digital literacy developments for those who work with young people and who might face online safety issues. While in some cases, individuals had attempted to have content taken down directly with platforms and been declined, and in some of these, the helpline was more successful than direct contact, there is a need to appreciate the nature of online defamation and libel, and how this relates to community standards, as well as how to report these issues. The helpline is a service that supports professionals tackling online safety incidents; it is not a service that polices online content based upon the moral views of a single professional.

The evidence from this year's analysis shows once again that many schools are dealing with online safety issues as part of their day-to-day professional practice and that online safeguarding remains a team effort that is far better tackled in partnership than in isolation. We can see in the helpline analysis requests coming from a wide range of professionals that other services (such as services operating by SWGfL and external partners such as the NSPCC and CEOP) will also be called upon to support professionals. Online safety issues can arise across a wide range of issues, ranging from a professional just needing a little advice and guidance to supporting with a case of criminal harm. Professionals cannot face these issues on their own, and it is important that national coordination around tackling online harms is brought into place.



## APPENDIX A – CATEGORY DESCRIPTIONS AND CASE EXAMPLES

### CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Issues related to the online sexual exploitation of minors. These will generally be concerns around the sharing of content containing images of young people, inappropriate contact of a sexual nature from people not known to the young people or content of this nature being sent to young people.

### CYBERBULLYING

A broad category related to online abuse directed at either young people or professionals working with young people. Many of these cases were concerned with content online that directly targets a victim or communication directed at a victim using online means.

### DATA PRIVACY

A rarely used category, but sometimes the helpline receives enquiries related to questions of data protection and privacy abuses, including one this year related to teachers removing data from a student's phone for "safeguarding reasons".

### E-CRIME

Another broad but rarely used category that relates to online criminal activity that is not categorised around sexual crimes. In one case this year, there was an enquiry about malicious communication that a student received claiming to be from the police, which turned out to be an attempted extortion.

### EXCESSIVE USE

A category used when professionals contact the helpline to raise questions about a young person's use of technology where there are concerns about screen time or compulsive use of technology, or concerns about these behaviours. In one case this year, a practitioner wanted guidance on what the signs of "addiction" were as they had concerns about a young person in their care.

### GAMING

Concerns around behaviour either within games (such as age-inappropriate content) or using gaming in a problematic manner. In one case this year, a practitioner had concerns about the legitimacy of a young person they worked with making money through establishing and administering gaming servers for customers.

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## GENERAL ENQUIRY

A broad category used for general advice about online safety policy and practice. In one example this year, a senior leader in a school asked for a list of filtering and monitoring providers to help them implement their safeguarding statutory duties.

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## GROOMING

Enquiries related specifically to sexual communication with a child in the professional's care, or concerns about whether this is happening. For example, a case where a professional had concerns about two children in their care being approached by someone claiming to be "into younger girls".

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## HATE SPEECH

Enquiries that raise concerns or ask questions about what constitutes hate speech online, or whether they can get support with content they consider to be hate speech. Sometimes, as in one case this year where the hate speech was directed at a member of staff in a school, this will cross over with the Online Reputation category.

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## LOVE/ RELATIONSHIPS/ SEXUALITY

Questions about sex and relationships related to online interactions. This year, there were no enquiries related to this category.

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## MEDIA ENQUIRY

A request from the media related to online safety and online harms. The helpline, and more generally SWGfL, are frequently approached for comment in the media on online harms issues, and the helpline enquiries system is sometimes used for this, although in only one instance this year.

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## MEDIA LITERACY/ EDUCATION

Questions related to education around online safety. This is a rare category to be used to contact the helpline, but it does occasionally happen. They generally relate to recommendations for resources and websites that will help the delivery of teaching around online safety and media literacy issues.

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## ONLINE REPUTATION

The largest number of cases relate to online reputation. Generally, the reputation being challenged relates either to professionals or an institution. While there are many enquiries of this nature, the majority will follow a similar pattern of discovering content or accounts online that are attacking the professional reputation or practice of individuals or schools and seeking advice regarding either takedowns or the legality of the posts. Many also contact the helpline because they have contacted the platform being used to host the content to make a complaint and have been told that no breach of community guidelines has taken place.

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## OTHER

A broad and rarely used category for anything that might relate to the helpline but cannot be categorised any other way.

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## OUT OF REMIT

Sometimes contact is made from someone who is not a professional working with young people, or the issue does not relate to the remit of the helpline (for example, there are occasionally private citizens disclosing intimate image abuse, which can be signposted to the Revenge Porn Helpline service). In most cases, if an enquiry is out of remit, they will be signposted to alternative services.

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## POLICY ENQUIRY

Occasionally, a professional will contact the helpline to ask for advice on the policy of an online platform or a legal question about a service. This rarely happens, but there was one case this year where a professional was concerned about a homework platform offering incentives for its use.

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## POTENTIALLY HARMFUL CONTENT

Concerns related to content online that professionals believe may be harmful to young people, usually due to a disclosure from either a professional or a young person. In one example this year, a teacher contacted the service because they were made aware of a video depicting violence on Twitter that had been disclosed to them by a student at their school.

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## PRANK CALLS

Enquiries to the helpline that are scams or pranks.

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## SEXTING

Seeking help and advice around sexting (intimate image sharing among minors) within the professional setting. This can relate to concerns about young people engaging in this behaviour or seeking advice and support on an incident where images of a student have been shared across the school community, which was the case with one example this year.

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## SEXTORTION

Enquiries specifically related to the practice of engaging in sexual discourse with a victim then making threats to, for example, share the content unless a fee is paid. A rarely used category and often signposted to the Revenge Porn Helpline unless it relates to sextortion involving a child or professional. No cases have occurred this year.

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## SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Persistent or repeated contact of a sexual nature directed to either young people or the professionals themselves. In a case this year, there were concerns about a student who was posting content online related to wishing to sexually assault named peers.

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## TECHNICAL SETTINGS

Advice and guidance on technical issues related to online safety. There are few of these enquiries, and they mainly relate to settings around filtering and monitoring.

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  - 3 *Professionals Online Safety Helpline Analysis 2021-2022, Exploring the Issues Professionals Face in Supporting Young People with Staying Safe Online*: <https://swgfl.org.uk/assets/documents/posh-report-2022.pdf>
  - 4 *Professionals Online Safety Helpline Analysis 2020-21, Exploring the Issues Professionals Face in Tackling Online Issues Affecting Young People*: <https://d1xsi6mgo67kia.cloudfront.net/uploads/2021/12/POSH-report.pdf>
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