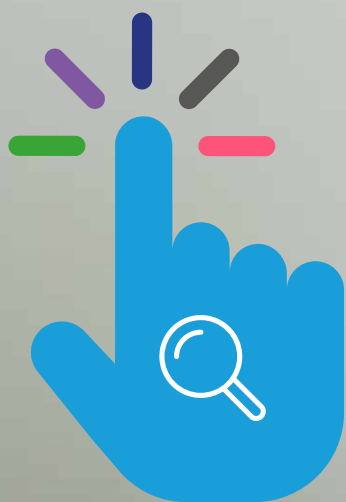




Online Safety Training Needs Analysis – Children and Young People’s Workforce Summary Report

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Executive summary

Background

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) was commissioned by the Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland (SBNI) to undertake a children's online safety training needs analysis for practitioners working with children, young people and those who care for them in Northern Ireland.

The overall aims of the project were:

- To undertake an online safety training needs analysis across those working with, and on behalf of, children and young people in Northern Ireland.
- To explore the current provision of online safety training in continued professional development for practitioners working with children, young people and those who care for them, including resources used.
- To identify gaps, needs of practitioners, and areas for improvement.

The project adopted a mixed methodology approach. This included qualitative interviews with 23 individuals from the SBNI's Online Safety Committee member organisations, and those recommended by them, in late 2024, and an online survey of the children and young people's workforce between January and March 2025 to form the quantitative basis for the analysis.

Current online safety training provision

The interviews and online survey sought information on the participant's access to children's online safety training in the last two years, its content, purpose and the quality of the training accessed.

Training accessed

Just over half of survey respondents accessed children's online safety training in the last two years (54%). The training covered a range of durations and was delivered by both external and internal providers via varied delivery methods, the majority via facilitator-led in person training. Training accessed included specific training focused solely on children and young people's online safety, or online safety content as part of a wider training course or programme, e.g. safeguarding training, job induction or part of a further or higher education course. Most survey respondents (62%) noted that the purpose of the training was both to improve their knowledge, awareness and understanding of children and young people's online safety issues, and to improve their skills development and practice.

Training content

The content of the training accessed by survey respondents was varied with the top 5 topics covered including:

- Child sexual abuse and exploitation
- Online harm and abuse
- Accessing harmful content e.g. pornography, misogyny, suicide and self-harm, radicalisation and extremism
- Grooming
- Online bullying

Training quality

Survey respondents were overall positive in their responses on the quality of the training they had accessed, with 83% reporting that it was very or quite effective. An exploration of the effective training accessed by survey respondents found that:

- The most frequently identified training was delivered by SBNI (via Leonard Consultancy specifically), covering the topics of technology assisted child sexual abuse and young people's relationship with technology: risks and gains.
- Training delivered by the voluntary and community sector was identified as being effective by survey respondents, spread across several providers. This training covered a wide variety of topics ranging from general online safety and child protection training to sextortion, pornography and young people, algorithms and AI, young people and sexual relationships, gaming and gambling harm, digital resilience and online scams. It also ranged in type from lunchtime learning sessions to OCN qualifications.
- In the statutory sector, the Education Authority (EA) was reported most frequently as delivering effective training across a range of practical topics including Child Protection and Safeguarding training, Designated Teacher Safeguarding training, Learn Cyber Security training, Protecting Professional Online Identity training, training for School Governors and Youth Service training.
- Joint training sessions were identified as effective, including joint EA/PSNI delivered training on Online Grooming and Exploitation of Children and Young People and Digital Safeguarding Core Awareness training delivered collaboratively by Trusts, Digital Safeguarding Groups, PSNI and the voluntary sector.

Workforce development activity on online safety

Practitioners use a variety of tools to support their work with children and young people, aside from specific training. This was reflected in the responses to the survey with **42% (n=243) of survey respondents reporting that they have accessed other children and young people's online safety resources to aid their learning and development in the last 2 years.**

The top 3 online safety resources accessed by survey respondents in the last 2 years are as follows:

- Online resources are the most frequently accessed resource used by practitioners with 88% of survey respondents rating them as very or quite effective
- Internal policies and procedures in their organisations are also accessed frequently, with a lower figure (66%) of survey respondents finding them effective
- 75% of survey respondents who reported having accessed additional resources have accessed the SBNI Online Safety Hub with most of those respondents rating it as very or quite effective

Survey respondents have also accessed bulletins/newsletters/regular emails, apps and text updates and alerts, with more varied ratings of effectiveness.

In identifying specific effective online safety resources, survey respondents gave multiple examples of resources in a variety of formats and from a range of providers (see Appendix 1).

Online safety training needs and priorities

To ascertain the online safety training needs and priorities of the children's workforce, it was important to establish what practitioners consider to be the main issues affecting children and young people's online safety and the challenges facing the workforce in better understanding, identifying and responding to children's online safety.

The online safety learning and development needs and priorities of the workforce have also been explored.

Issues affecting children and young people's online safety

The top issue affecting children and young people's online safety, identified by 74% of respondents, was limited parental involvement in/monitoring of children's online activities. Following this, the other key issues identified are online harm and abuse (e.g. trolling, cyberbullying, sectarianism, hurtful communication between children), excessive screen time, lack of understanding of the laws around online behaviour (e.g. sharing images, age restrictions) and technology-assisted child sexual abuse/exploitation.

These findings align with the content areas covered by existing training, particularly online sexual abuse, harm and bullying however, there was no mention of excessive screen time or supporting parents to monitor/support their child's online activities in the information on training content provided by respondents.

Challenges facing the workforce

The survey findings show that the workforce experiences multiple challenges regarding online safety for children and young people. All the challenges listed were confirmed as issues for respondents, with very little separating each in terms of ranking. Only 'lack of willingness/fear within the organisation to deal with online safety/sensitive topics' emerged as a lower issue for many. Challenges include lack of capacity and funding to support development; difficulty staying up to date with emerging trends; dissemination of information within organisations; lack of focus on the benefits of the online world; poor quality or lack of quality assurance; lack of knowledge and confidence; and many other issues.

Respondents also reported overwhelm at the amount of information in an ever-changing environment, and requirements in relation to discrete groups of children and young people and their specific needs. One observation on the lack of training/information available to parents speaks to the concern above around a lack of parental engagement.

Online safety learning and development needs

Respondents' top preference in terms of types of online safety learning and development is for access to regular, updated online safety training. This aligns with the issues and challenges summarised above. All other suggested learning and development support were also considered valuable, including case studies on how to appropriately deal with a range of scenarios, improved organisational policies, online safety champions, access to approved training list and third-level course content for practitioners.

As with the learning above, the workforce is open to multi-faceted support in this area. Indeed, qualitative feedback referred several times to the need for 'holistic' training and support, that recognises how online safety is embedded across children's lives and experiences.

A holistic and consistent approach to learning and development was recommended by survey respondents and the need for parents to be educated on their children's online safety was again raised.

Other survey respondents reported that the online safety of vulnerable children, whether they have special educational needs, neurodiversity or are in the care system, needs to be taken seriously in organisational policies and procedures and in the focus of any training provided to practitioners working with them.

Conclusions

Key takeaways from the online safety training needs analysis are summarised below.

Relevance of online safety training

1. There is clearly a focus on the importance of online safety for all those working with children and young people, and this should continue to be promoted.
2. Further research is required to consider whether there is a stronger focus on online safety for those working with older age groups, and if so, how training can be adapted for younger groups.

Availability of online safety training

3. Guidance on good quality training, and funding to access this regularly, would be valued by the workforce.

Content and focus of online safety training

4. Given the changing nature of technology, the workforce is keen to be kept up to date with emerging issues and themes, and to learn how to support young people with these, alongside the more serious issues.

Other sources of support

5. Practitioners should be supported to identify and access a range of quality-assured information.
6. Tailored resources to support those working with children and young people with SEN would be valuable.

Issues affecting young people's safety

7. A mapping of workforce, and indeed parent and child concerns, against training content, is a critical step in training development to ensure the content matches real-life concerns and issues. Co-production of training resources and packages would maximise the usefulness and relevance of these for the target audience.

Challenges facing the workforce

8. Despite the wide range of online safety training and support available, a wide range of concerns still exist. Therefore, more needs to be done to best support the workforce, and therefore children and young people and those that support them, building on the range of training available, and listening to the views of the workforce to best address challenges.

Learning and development needs

9. Online safety is not a 'one size fits all' issue, therefore training and resources must build a suite of support to meet the range of needs and audiences and reflect the real-life situations for children and young people. Importantly, the workforce is keen that this includes emphasis on the positive benefits of the online world, as well as the challenges.

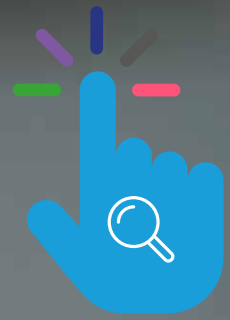
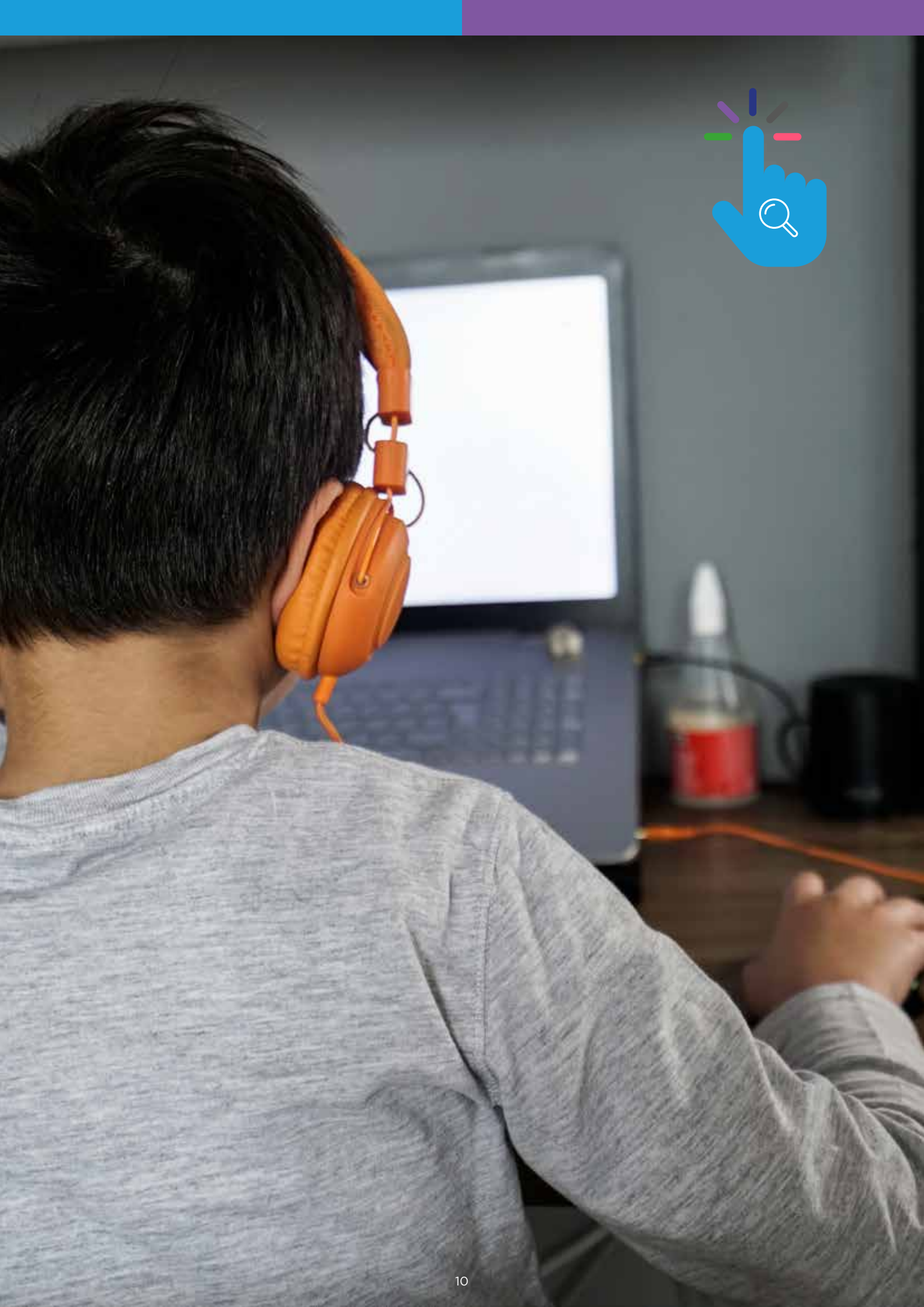
Conclusion

Online safety is a universal concern for the children and young people's workforce across all sectors and areas of work. While there are many formal and informal training, learning and development resources available, the workforce remains concerned at how they can best support children, young people and families that they work with.

There is a common concern around knowing which resources to trust in terms of quality; a struggle to balance the content focus between the headline dangers experienced by the minority, versus the day-to-day experiences of the majority (absolutely recognising the need for both); and the ever-changing online world developments.

Access to quality training, alongside regularly updated informal but quality-assessed resources, and critically, the funds to access these, are essential. Collaborative approaches to developing resources, alongside the workforce, children, young people and parents, will ensure that they remain aligned to real-world challenges and meet ongoing needs. The number of responses, and qualitative insights given, demonstrate a passion to keep children and young people safe online, while also ensuring they can make the most of the opportunities that the online world brings.





1 Introduction

Background and aims

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) was commissioned by the Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland (SBNI) in Autumn 2024 to undertake a children's online safety training needs analysis for practitioners working with children, young people and those who care for them in Northern Ireland. This included an exploration of the current provision of online safety training in continued professional development for practitioners, including resources used, and to identify gaps, the needs of practitioners in children's online safety training and priority areas for improvement.

The analysis will support the delivery of actions in the Northern Ireland Executive's Online Safety Strategy Action Plan.

Project Aims

The overall aims of the project were:

- To undertake an online safety training needs analysis across those working with, and on behalf of, children and young people in Northern Ireland.
- To explore the current provision of online safety training in continued professional development for practitioners working with children, young people and those who care for them, including resources used.
- To identify gaps, needs of practitioners, and areas for improvement.

It should be noted that references to training in this report relate to children and young people's online safety training.





2 Methodology

This project adopted a mixed methodology approach including qualitative interviews with individuals from Online Safety Committee member organisations, and those recommended by them, in November and December 2024 and an online survey of the children and young people's workforce between January and March 2025 to form the quantitative basis for the analysis. This approach enabled the project team to combine findings and develop an understanding of the current provision of online safety training for practitioners and to identify gaps, the needs of practitioners in children's online safety training and priority areas for improvement.

Overview of fieldwork activities

Stage 1: Qualitative interviews

Interview participants were identified through consultation with the Online Safety Committee at a meeting on 8 October 2024 with representation across various workforce sectors. NCB carried out 10 semi-structured interviews with a total of 23 people in both group and individual interviews. A list of the 10 interviews conducted and the participants' areas of work is listed below:

- 1. Education**
- 2. Further Education**
- 3. Western Digital Steering Group**
- 4. Fostering and Adoption Service**
- 5. Voluntary and Community Sector/Children with special education need/disability (SEND)**
- 6. PSNI/Justice**
- 7. Health and Social Care Teams**
- 8. Voluntary and Community Sector/Children's Rights**
- 9. Third Level Education**
- 10. Voluntary and Community Sector/Training Provider**

A topic guide was developed by NCB, with feedback from SBNI, to structure the interviews. The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to get perspectives from key individuals and organisations on current online safety training provision in Northern Ireland and the training needs of practitioners working with children and young people and those who care for them.

NCB presented the findings from the qualitative interviews at the SBNI's Online Safety Committee meeting on 10 December 2024. A discussion of the findings and any gaps informed the next stage of the research - the online survey of the wider children and young people's workforce. Some of the qualitative findings from the interviews have been included in this report to build on the quantitative analysis.

Stage 2: Online survey of wider children and young people's workforce

NCB designed a survey of 27 questions on Survey Monkey which was circulated widely to target respondents in the children and young people's workforce by the SBNI and their Online Safety Committee members, via email, on websites and through social media. To ensure high participation, NCB monitored response rates, and follow-up reminders were disseminated to improve response rates and ensure a comprehensive dataset for the analysis.

The findings of the interviews and feedback from the Online Safety Committee informed the survey design and content.

The aims of the survey were to:

- understand the workforce's current experience of learning and development in online safety.
- gather views on the issues and challenges faced in this area and what training and development would be useful.

Profile of survey respondents

A total of 667 survey respondents completed the online survey across a number of workforce sectors and areas, as indicated by Figure 1 and Table 1 below:

Figure 1

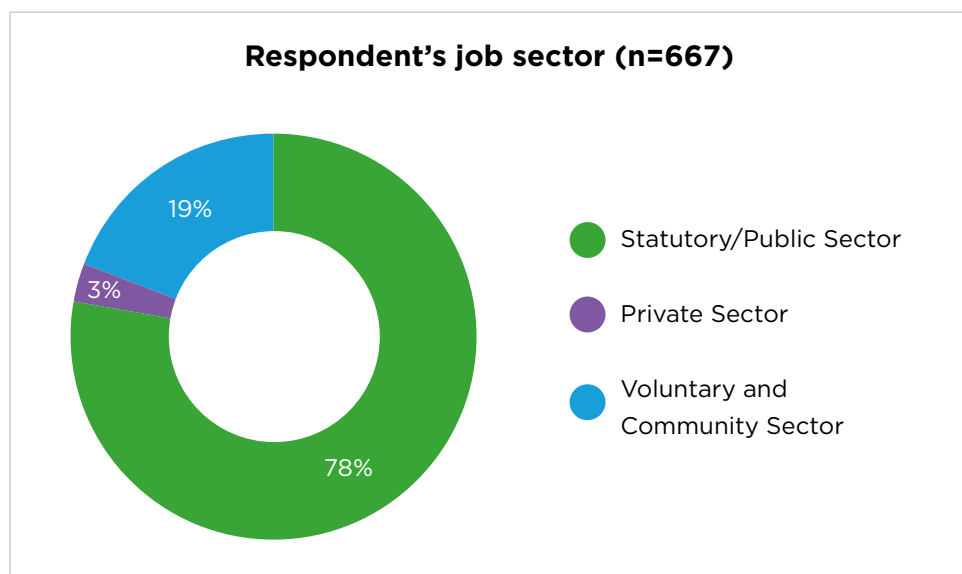


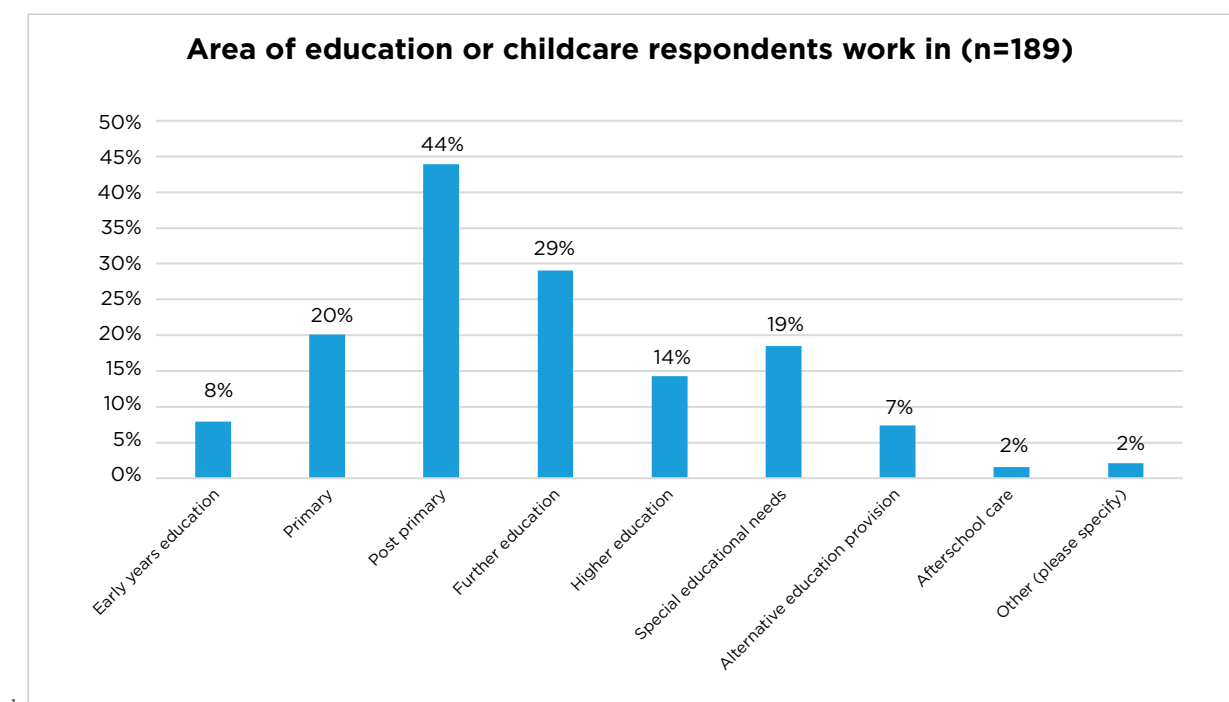
Table 1

Area of respondents' work	Response (n=667)	
Health	18%	123
Social Work/Care	12%	77
Family Support	8%	55
Justice	18%	123
Education	30%	199
Youth	7%	47
Across a range of the above areas	5%	32
Other	2%	11

Source – Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025

Respondents who answered 'other' were from a variety of backgrounds including the arts, students, training providers and IT.

The largest group of survey respondents were from the education sector, a large workforce working closely with children and young people. Of those from the education sector, respondents indicated that they worked with children and young people across several areas, as demonstrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

The data indicated a relatively even spread of responses across geographic areas of Northern Ireland (Table 2), giving weight to the view that this is an issue that the workforce across Northern Ireland is concerned with.

Table 2

Geographical area/s that respondents work across	Response (n=652)	
Belfast Health & Social Care Trust area	21%	140
Western Health & Social Care Trust area	15%	99
South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust area	17%	111
Southern Health & Social Care Trust area	15%	97
Northern Health & Social Care Trust area	18%	119
Across all/a number of areas	13%	86

Source – Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025

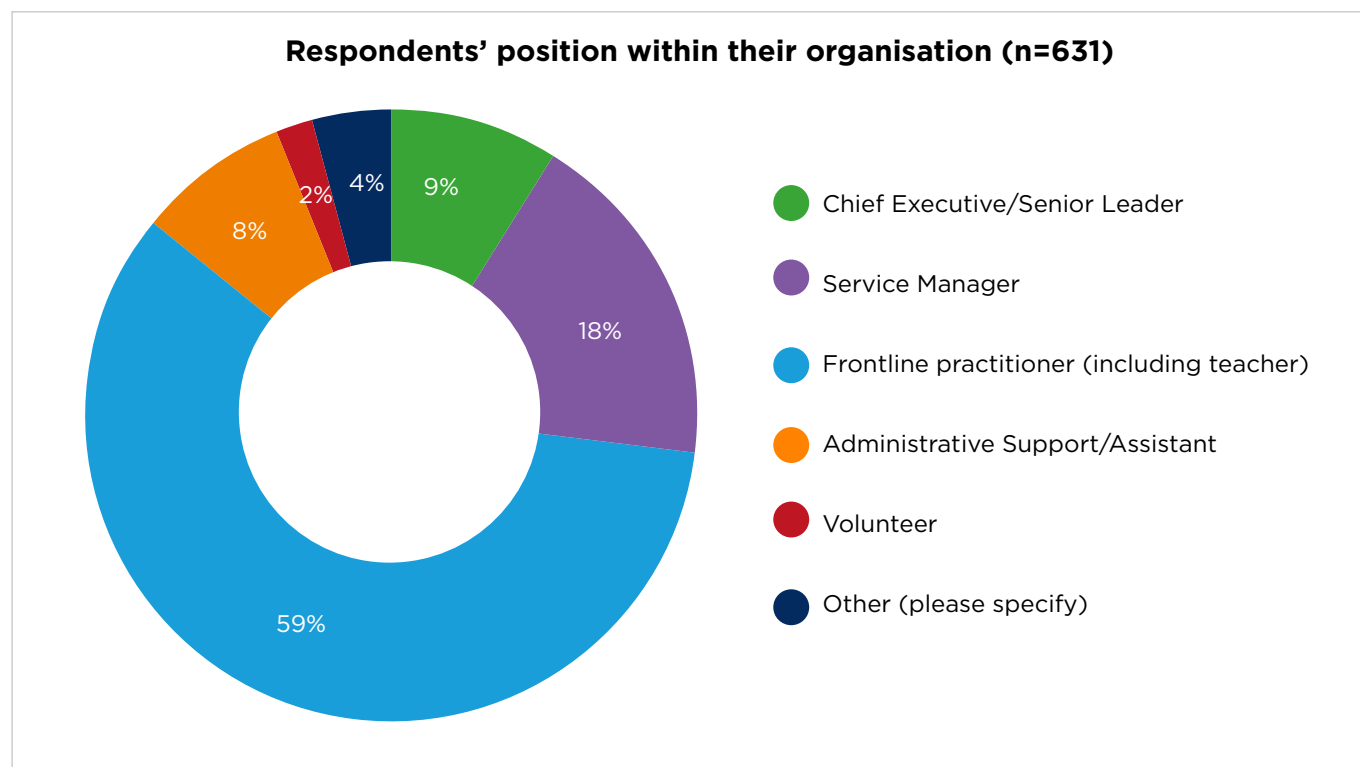
In terms of how closely the respondents work with children and young people, 60% (n=394) of survey respondents indicated that they have lots of direct contact with children and young people in their roles, 20% (n=128) have some direct contact and 20% (n=130) have little to no direct contact with children and young people.

30% (n=186) of survey respondents stated that they have direct responsibility for children and young people's online safety in their role.

¹ Respondents could tick all areas of education that they worked in, therefore one respondent could indicate that they work across multiple areas

Figure 3 below shows the breakdown of respondents by position within their organisation.

Figure 3



Interestingly, survey respondents' positions within their organisation did not necessarily have any correlation with the level of contact that they have with children and young people in their role. While the majority of frontline practitioners, 282 out of 373 (76%), have lots of direct contact with children and young people, 35 out of 57 (61%) Chief Executives/Senior Leaders stated that they have lots of direct contact, 25 out of 52 (48%) Administrative Support/Assistants have lots of direct contact and 33 out of 115 (29%) Service Managers have lots of direct contact with children and young people.

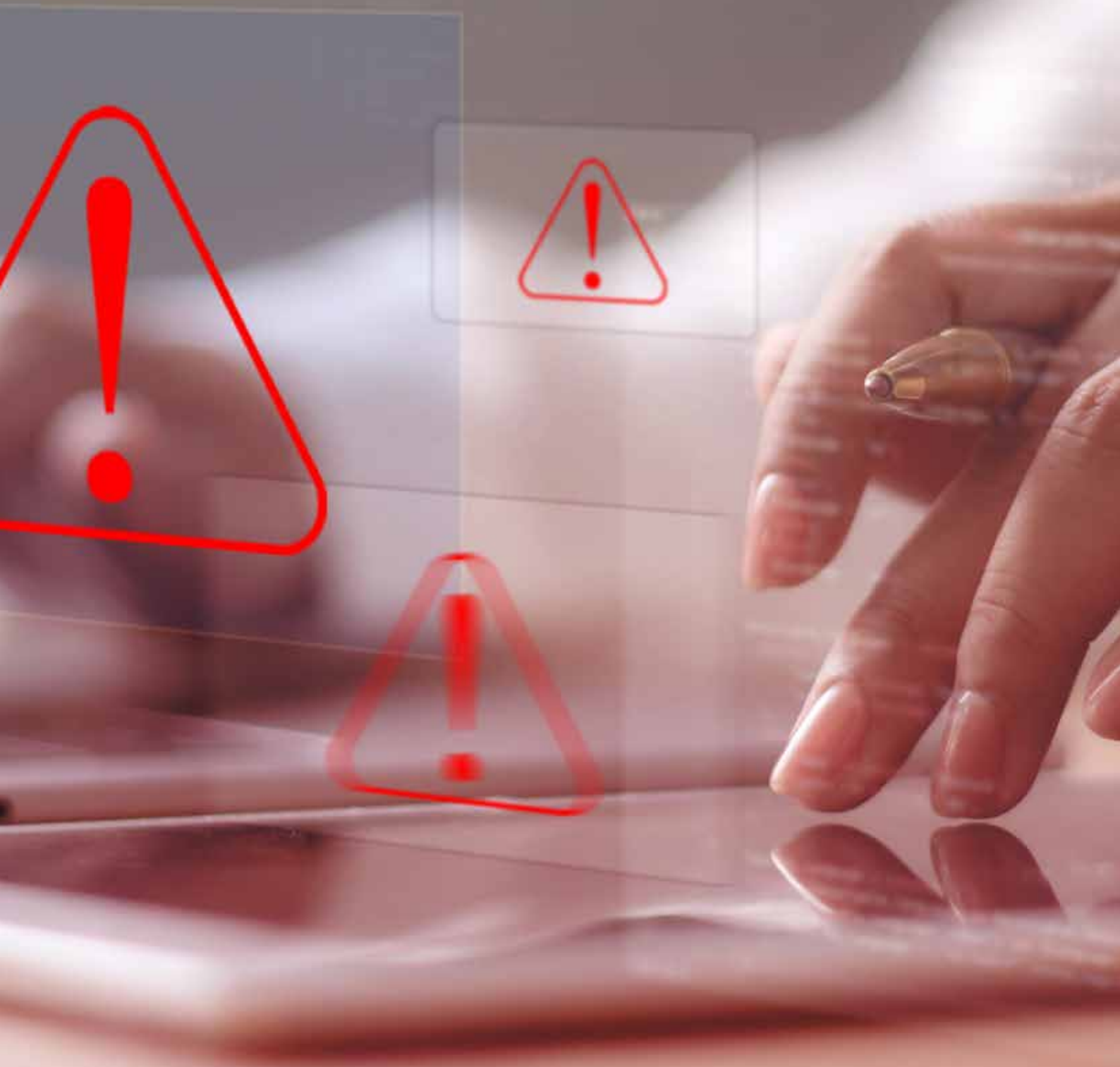
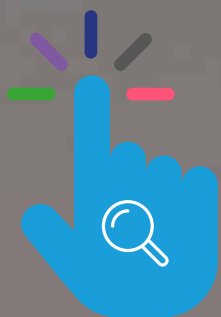
It is also interesting to note that 95% (n=614) of survey respondents indicated that they or their organisation work with children with special educational needs.

22% of survey respondents stated that they deliver online safety training (n=631). Of those respondents, 38% have delivered online safety training to parents/carers/guardians in the last year (n=140). Capturing the perspectives of those providing online safety training is significant in providing a broader picture of the current training landscape in Northern Ireland.

Structure of this report

Chapter 3 onwards presents and discusses the key findings from the quantitative survey data, incorporating narrative from the qualitative interviews. The findings are presented under the following sections:

- Chapter 3 – Current online safety training provision
- Chapter 4 – Workforce development activity on online safety
- Chapter 5 – Online safety training needs
- Chapter 6 – Conclusions



3 Current online safety training provision

The interviews and online survey sought information on the participant's access to children's online safety training in the last 2 years, with specific questions on the type of training accessed, its purpose, whether it was accessed within their organisations or externally, the method of delivery, the duration of the training, the content of the training and their thoughts on the quality of the training.

Overview of training accessed

Just over half of survey respondents (54%, n=334) indicated that they have accessed training in relation to keeping children and young people safe online in the last 2 years. It is interesting to note that a significant proportion of the survey respondents (46%, n=286) have not accessed any training in this area in the last 2 years.

Of the respondents who indicated that they had accessed children's online safety training, the following further information was provided:

- 45% (n=136) of survey respondents have accessed one training course and 55% (n=165) have accessed two or more training courses in the last 2 years. This indicates that the survey sample has a breadth of recent experience of training in relation to keeping children and young people safe online in Northern Ireland.
- Looking at the proportions of particular sectors of the children's workforce that have accessed training in the last 2 years, just under half of statutory sector respondents had accessed training, just over half of private sector respondents had accessed training and the highest proportion, 60%, of voluntary and community sector respondents had accessed training in the last 2 years (see Table 3 below).

Table 3

Percentage of respondents that has accessed children's online safety training in the last 2 years by work sector	
Statutory/Public sector staff	47% (247 out of 520)
Private sector	53% (9 out of 17)
Voluntary and community sector	60% (78 out of 130)
Source - Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025	

- 46% (n=140) of survey respondents reported that the training they had accessed was provided by an external training provider and 28% (n=85) of survey respondents reported that the training they had accessed was provided by their organisation. 25% (n=77) of survey respondents had accessed training from both their organisation and external organisations.
- In terms of the type of training accessed, 41% (n=125) of survey respondents reported that they had accessed **specific training focused solely on children and young people's online safety**, 22% (n=65) of survey respondents reported that they had accessed **online safety content as part of a wider training course or programme**. 37% (n=112) of survey respondents reported that they had accessed a mixture of both. This reflects the wide variety of training that has been accessed which will be explored in more detail in the section on training content.

- The duration of the training accessed varied, however it is interesting to note that the highest proportion of survey respondents reported that the training they accessed was for **half a day or less** (65%, n=195). Looking at the frequency of access to short, half a day or less, training courses, just over half (52%, n=102) of those respondents had accessed one course that lasted half a day or less, 39% (n=77) accessed two to three and 8% (n=16) had accessed four or more short courses.
- Survey respondents reported that there was a variety of training delivery methods used when accessing online safety training, as indicated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4



Training content

The online survey used the '4 Cs of online safety' to group information on the content areas covered in the training that respondents had accessed. This categorisation was developed by the Department for Education as part of their safeguarding guidance, Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)². While KCSIE is only a statutory requirement in England, its structured approach serves as a valuable resource.

The KCSIE guidelines groups online safety risks into four areas: Content, Contact, Conduct, and Commerce. These categories address exposure to harmful material, harmful online interactions, inappropriate online behaviour, and risks linked to gambling, phishing and financial exploitation.

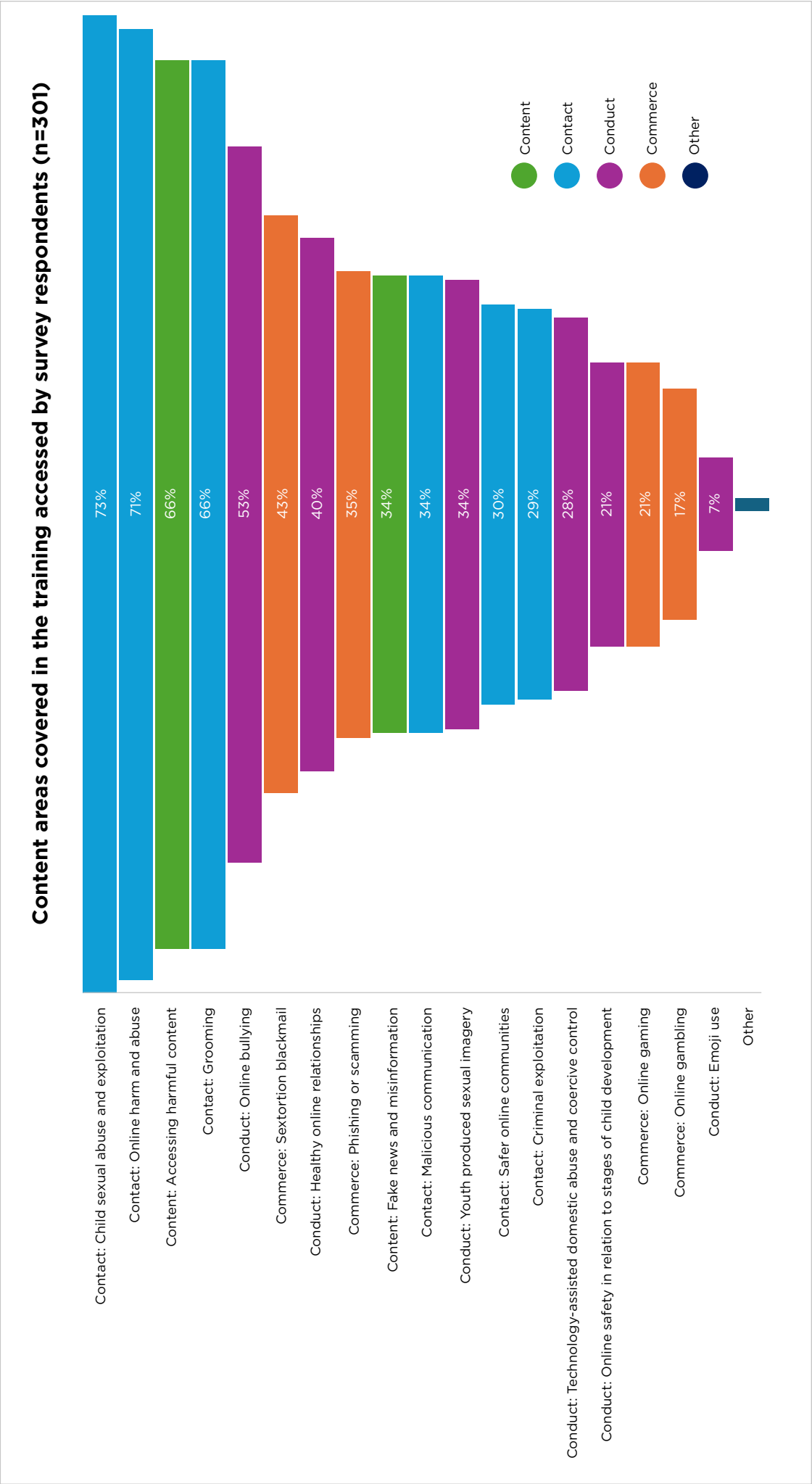
As shown in Figure 5 below, survey respondents indicated that **child sexual abuse and exploitation** was the topic most covered by the training accessed (73%, n=220). This was followed by **online harm and abuse** (71%, n=214), accessing harmful content (66%, n=200), **grooming** (66%, n=200) and **online bullying** (53%, n=161).

The least commonly reported content areas were emoji use as a form of communication amongst young people (7%, n=21), online gambling (17%, n=52) and online gaming (21%, n=64).

Respondents who responded 'other' referred to content including looking at different apps and privacy settings as other topics covered in their training (1%, n=3).

² Keeping children safe in education - GOV.UK

Figure 5



Purpose of training

Just under a third of survey respondents (31%, n=93) reported that the purpose of the training they had accessed was **to improve their knowledge, awareness and understanding of children and young people's online safety issues**. The majority of survey respondents (62%, n=185) reported that the purpose of the training was **both** to improve their knowledge, awareness and understanding of children and young people's online safety issues **and** to improve their skills development and practice.

Quality of training

In describing the quality of the training accessed, survey respondents were overall positive in their responses. Over half of respondents reported that the training they accessed was **quite effective** (52%, n=154) and 31% (n=93) reported that it was very effective. It is worth noting that a small percentage of respondents (5%, n=16) reported that the training they accessed was **not very effective** or **not at all effective**.

Where respondents reported that the training they accessed was quite or very effective, the survey asked them to provide further detail on the training, to gather a picture of what is regarded within the workforce as effective training in the children's online safety training field in Northern Ireland. 116 answers were received, with a total of 162 mentions of effective training. Figure 6 and Table 4 below illustrate that the training identified by survey respondents as being effective was delivered by a variety of providers, by sector.

Figure 6



Table 4

Effective online safety training as identified by survey respondents (n=162)			
Training source	Details	Specific training identified by 5 or more survey respondents	Percentage of total survey responses
Training provided by the SBNI	The majority of these respondents specifically identified training delivered by Leonard Consultancy, commissioned by SBNI	Training delivered by Leonard Consultancy, commissioned by SBNI (20%, n=32)	22% (n=35)
Training provided by statutory sector	Includes training through Education Authority, councils, Trusts, government departments, schools, PSNI, Public Health Agency, further education colleges	Education Authority (8%, n=13)	25% (n=40)
Training provided by voluntary & community sector	Includes training provided by voluntary & community sector	Nexus NI (6%, n=10) YGam (6%, n=10) NSPCC (6%, n=9) UK Safer Internet Centre (5%, n=8) Barnardo's (4%, n=6) Youth Work Alliance (3%, n=5)	39% (n=63)
Professional training	Includes training provided by professional body (Community Practitioners & Health Visitors Association CPVHA), Youth Worker OCN training and College of Policing training		2% (n=3)
Training provided by private sector	A range of private delivery organisations/ individuals were mentioned		8% (n=13)
Other	Includes report launch (Growing Up Online research) and other training with not enough detail provided to identify source		5% (n=8)
Source – Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025			

In terms of individual training, the most frequently identified training was commissioned by the Safeguarding Board NI and delivered by Marcella Leonard, Leonard Consultancy (20%, n=32). The training on Technology Assisted Child Sexual Abuse and Young People's Relationship with Technology: Risks and Gains were mentioned by several respondents,

“Excellent and thought provoking” (survey respondent)

“This training should be mandatory for any professional working with children and families” (survey respondent)

“This was a most helpful and very effective course in showing how recent developments in technology are multiplying the risk to children and young people and that the impact of technology-assisted abuse is more wide-reaching than in-contact abuse. The importance of discovery rather than disclosure was highlighted and the need for ‘low-level’ concerns to be picked up and referred to social services for early intervention” (survey respondent)

Training provided by the voluntary and community sector was identified as being effective by the largest number of survey respondents (39%, n=63), however this was spread across several providers. Those organisations identified by survey respondents as effective **5 or more times** include Nexus NI, YGam, NSPCC, UK Safer Internet Centre, Barnardo’s and Youth Work Alliance.

Survey respondents reported that training and lunchtime learning sessions delivered by Nexus NI were effective on topics such as Sextortion, Algorithms and AI: Child Sexual Abuse Images, Revenge Porn: Adult Intimate Image Abuse, Pornography and Young People, Young People and Sexual Relationships.

YGam deliver specialist gaming and gambling harm prevention workshops:

“I have also accessed gaming and gambling course provided by YGam which was very informative” (survey respondent)

NSPCC’s online safety training was mentioned a number of times:

“All training provided was very insightful and useful to applying when working with students daily” (survey respondent)

Survey respondents mentioned accessing effective training around UK Safer Internet Day. The most recent of these, in February 2025, was a webinar for educators focused on protecting children from online scams. It was facilitated by Childnet, the Education Authority and the SBNi

Barnardo’s training on online safety and safeguarding, trauma after child sexual abuse and childhood development was also mentioned by survey respondents as effective training. Youth Work Alliance was also reported as delivering effective online safety training on the following topics: OCN Level 2 in Gambling and Digital Resilience Awareness and Child Protection Officer training.

In the statutory sector, the Education Authority (EA) was reported most frequently as delivering effective training (8%, n=13). Specific EA training mentioned included Active Bystander training, Child Protection and Safeguarding training, Designated Teacher Safeguarding training, Learn Cyber Security training, Protecting Professional Online Identity training, training for governors, Youth Service training and joint training with the PSNI on Online Grooming and Exploitation of Children and Young People.

Digital Safeguarding Core Awareness training delivered by the Western Health & Social Care Trust and the Northern Digital Safeguarding Group (statutory sector) and NSPCC, Dry Arch Centre, PSNI and YGam (mix of statutory and voluntary sector) was also referred to by survey respondents.

“The training focused on the benefits and harms that children and young people face in the online world and provided resources to support practitioners in their safeguarding work with children. The training went beyond just ‘e-safety’ and explored key aspects of digital safeguarding, including the promotion of digital literacy, critical thinking skills and resilience. It also covered strategies for preventing harm and protection measures when harm had already occurred” (survey respondent, referring to the Digital Safeguarding Core Awareness training)

A large number of online safety training examples was identified by survey respondents three times or less. It is important to also include information on this training as survey respondents reported it as effective. INEQE on the Safer Schools App was mentioned (discussed in the next section). Thrive Academy, Vanessa Rogers, PRMT Marketing, Tricky Topics, the Digital Futures for Children Centre (DFC) and Wayne Denner were also reported as delivering effective online safety training.

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of training accessed by survey respondents over the last 2 years, its content, purpose and the quality of the training accessed.

Training accessed

Just over half of survey respondents accessed children’s online safety training in the last 2 years (54%). The training covered a range of durations and was delivered by both external and internal providers via varied delivery methods, the majority via facilitator-led in person training. Training accessed included specific training focused solely on children and young people’s online safety, or online safety content as part of a wider training course or programme, e.g. safeguarding training, job induction or part of a further or higher education course. The majority of survey respondents (62%) noted that the purpose of the training was both to improve their knowledge, awareness and understanding of children and young people’s online safety issues, and to improve their skills development and practice.

Training content

The content of the training accessed by survey respondents was varied with the top 5 topics covered including:

- Child sexual abuse and exploitation
- Online harm and abuse
- Accessing harmful content e.g. pornography, misogyny, suicide and self-harm, radicalisation and extremism
- Grooming
- Online bullying

Training quality

Survey respondents were overall positive in their responses on the quality of the training they had accessed, with 83% reporting that it was very or quite effective. An exploration of the effective training accessed by survey respondents found that:

- The most frequently identified training was delivered by Safeguarding Board NI (via Leonard Consultancy specifically), covering the topics of technology assisted child sexual abuse and young people's relationship with technology: risks and gains.
- Training delivered by the voluntary and community sector was identified as being effective by survey respondents, spread across a number of providers. This training covered a wide variety of topics ranging from general online safety and child protection training to sextortion, pornography and young people, algorithms and AI, young people and sexual relationships, gaming and gambling harm, digital resilience and online scams. It also ranged in type from lunchtime learning sessions to OCN qualifications.
- In the statutory sector, the Education Authority (EA) was reported most frequently as delivering effective training across a range of practical topics including Child Protection and Safeguarding training, Designated Teacher Safeguarding training, Learn Cyber Security training, Protecting Professional Online Identity training, training for governors and Youth Service training.
- Joint training sessions were identified as effective, including joint EA/PSNI delivered training on Online Grooming and Exploitation of Children and Young People and Digital Safeguarding Core Awareness training delivered collaboratively by Trusts, Digital Safeguarding Groups, PSNI and the voluntary sector.





4 Workforce development activity on online safety

In discussing workforce development in children's online safety in the interviews, it became clear that practitioners use a variety of tools to support their work with children and young people, aside from specific training. This was reflected in the responses to the survey with **42% (n=243) of survey respondents reporting that they have accessed other children and young people's online safety resources to aid their learning and development in the last 2 years.**

Those who confirmed that they had accessed other online safety resources in the last 2 years were then asked to rate the resources' effectiveness in improving their awareness, understanding and practice in the area of children and young people's online safety. The following analysis is based on responses from 228 survey respondents who provided answers to this question. Figure 7 and Table 5 below show how many survey respondents have accessed different online safety resources in the last 2 years and how they rated their effectiveness.

Figure 7

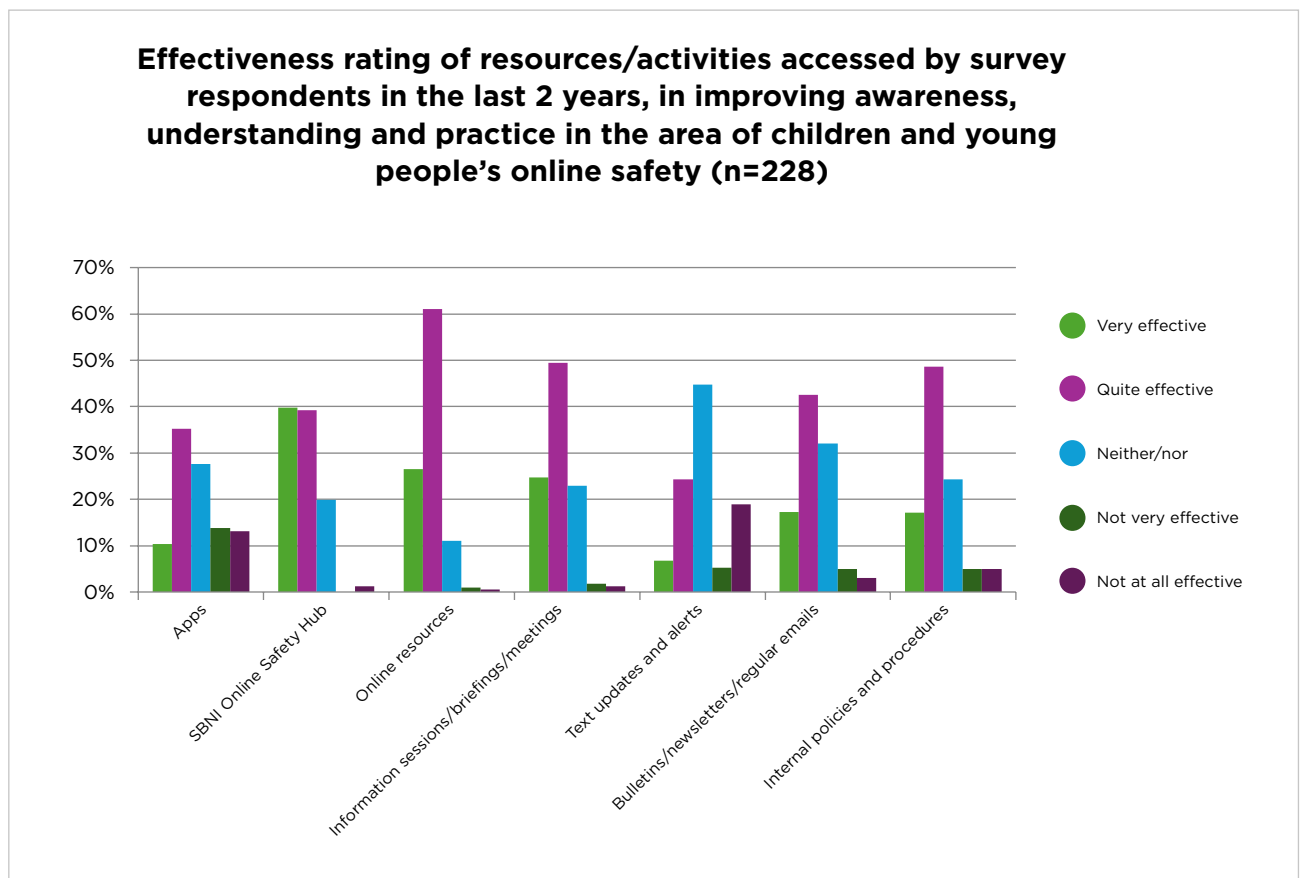


Table 5

Online safety resources/activities accessed by survey respondents in the last 2 years and their effectiveness in improving awareness, understanding and practice in the area of children and young people's online safety (n=228)						
	Very effective	Quite effective	Neither/nor	Not very effective	Not at all effective	Total
Online Resources	27% (n=53)	61% (n=122)	11% (n=22)	1% (n=2)	1% (n=1)	200 (88%)
Internal policies and procedures in their organisation	17% (n=31)	49% (n=88)	24% (n=44)	5% (n=9)	5% (n=9)	181 (79%)
SBNI Online Safety Hub	40% (n=68)	39% (n=67)	20% (n=34)	0%	1% (n=2)	171 (75%)
Information sessions/briefings/meetings (not part of a training course)	25% (n=41)	49% (n=82)	23% (n=38)	2% (n=3)	1% (n=2)	166 (73%)
Bulletins/newsletters/regular emails	17% (n=28)	43% (n=69)	32% (n=52)	5% (n=8)	3% (n=5)	162 (71%)
Apps	10% (n=15)	35% (n=51)	28% (n=40)	14% (n=20)	13% (n=19)	145 (64%)
Text updates and alerts	7% (n=9)	24% (n=32)	45% (n=59)	5% (n=7)	19% (n=25)	132 (58%)
Source – Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025						

The information above demonstrates that a significant proportion of survey respondents have accessed online safety resources or activities in the last 2 years. For those who provided further information on the other online safety resources or activities they've accessed (n=228), the highest number accessed online resources (88%, n=200) and the lowest number accessed text updates and alerts (58%, n=132). A breakdown of those figures is as follows:

- Most survey respondents have accessed **online resources** in the last 2 years (**88%, n=200**), with **88% (n=175)** of those respondents rating them as **very or quite effective**.
- 79% (n=181) of survey respondents have accessed **internal policies and procedures** in their organisations, with **66% (n=119)** of those respondents rating them as **very or quite effective**. Comparatively, **10% (n=18)** rated them as **not very or not at all effective**.
- Three quarters of survey respondents (75%, n=171) have accessed the **SBNI Online Safety Hub**, with **most of those respondents (79%, n=135)** rating it as **very or quite effective**.
- 73% (n=166) of survey respondents have accessed **information sessions/briefings/meetings** (not part of a training course), with **74% (n=123)** of those respondents rating it as **very or quite effective**.
- 71% (n=162) of survey respondents have accessed **bulletins/newsletters/regular emails**, with **60% (n=97)** of those respondents rating them as **very or quite effective**.
- 64% (n=145) of survey respondents have accessed **apps**, with **less than half of those respondents (45%, n=66)** rating them as **very or quite effective**. Comparatively, **27% (n=39)** rated them as **not very or not at all effective**.
- Finally, 58% (n=132) of survey respondents have accessed **text updates and alerts**, with **just under a third of those respondents (31%, n=41)** rating them as **very or quite effective**. Comparatively, **24%** rated them as **not very or not at all effective**.

Where respondents reported that they had accessed effective resources to improve their awareness, understanding and practice in the area of children and young people's online safety in the last 2 years, the survey asked them to provide further information.

86 survey respondents provided information on effective online safety resources that they have accessed, with a total of 145 mentions of effective resources. The resources identified by most survey respondents as being effective were in a variety of formats and from a range of providers.

The SBNI Online Safety Hub was identified by the most survey respondents (14%, n=21) as an effective online safety resource.

“SBNI provides a large wealth of knowledge and resources regarding online safety”
(survey respondent)

NSPCC resources were mentioned by 13% of respondents (n=19), including their Keeping Safe resource.

“NSPCC Keeping Safe - this was a fantastic resource provided to schools for free by DENI. However, it was recently removed for school access so it can no longer be used. The resources created were child friendly and at a level that was accessible to all ages”
(survey respondent)

Two apps were identified as effective resources by survey respondents. 8% of respondents (n=11) identified the Safer Schools App as an effective resource and 3% of respondents (n=5) identified the Fostering in a Digital World App, both developed by the INEQE Safeguarding Group through partnership with the Department of Education and HSC Northern Ireland Foster Care, respectively.

Other online resources mentioned by more than 5 survey respondents were from the following providers: Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre (7%, n=10), UK Safer Internet Centre (5%, n=7), Internet Matters (4%, n=6) and Childnet (3%, n=5).

24 other online resources were identified by survey respondents at a lower frequency than those referred to above. A full list of the resources identified by survey respondents is in Appendix 1.

Bulletins and newsletters were identified by 7 (5%) survey respondents as effective resources and included school newsletters, Education Authority CPSS and C2K newsletters and the NSPCC CASPAR newsletter.

“As a school we use the Safer Schools App which includes a lot of up to date information in relation to online behaviour. We have actively encouraged students, parents and staff to download the app and remain up to date. Additionally, it has an easy platform for students or parents to report online concerns” (survey respondent)

“Fostering in a digital world, although it is seriously flawed without access to policies and procedures from the HSC Trusts to guide foster carers” (survey respondent)

Other online safety resources identified by survey respondents included research publications, podcasts, documentaries and advice providers such as Childline and Barnardo's. A small number of survey respondents (n=4) reported that there is a lack of online safety resources for those working with children and young people with additional needs.

“More focus needed on children with SEN and SLD, parents and professionals need tailored education” (survey respondent)

“It seems there are a lot of resources for mainstream schools but nothing for especially for special schools or pupils with SDL” (survey respondent)

“There is no tailored online safeguarding education and training for teachers/ parents of children with severe learning difficulties” (survey respondent)

“I work in a special school and there are no resources for children with additional needs” (survey respondent)

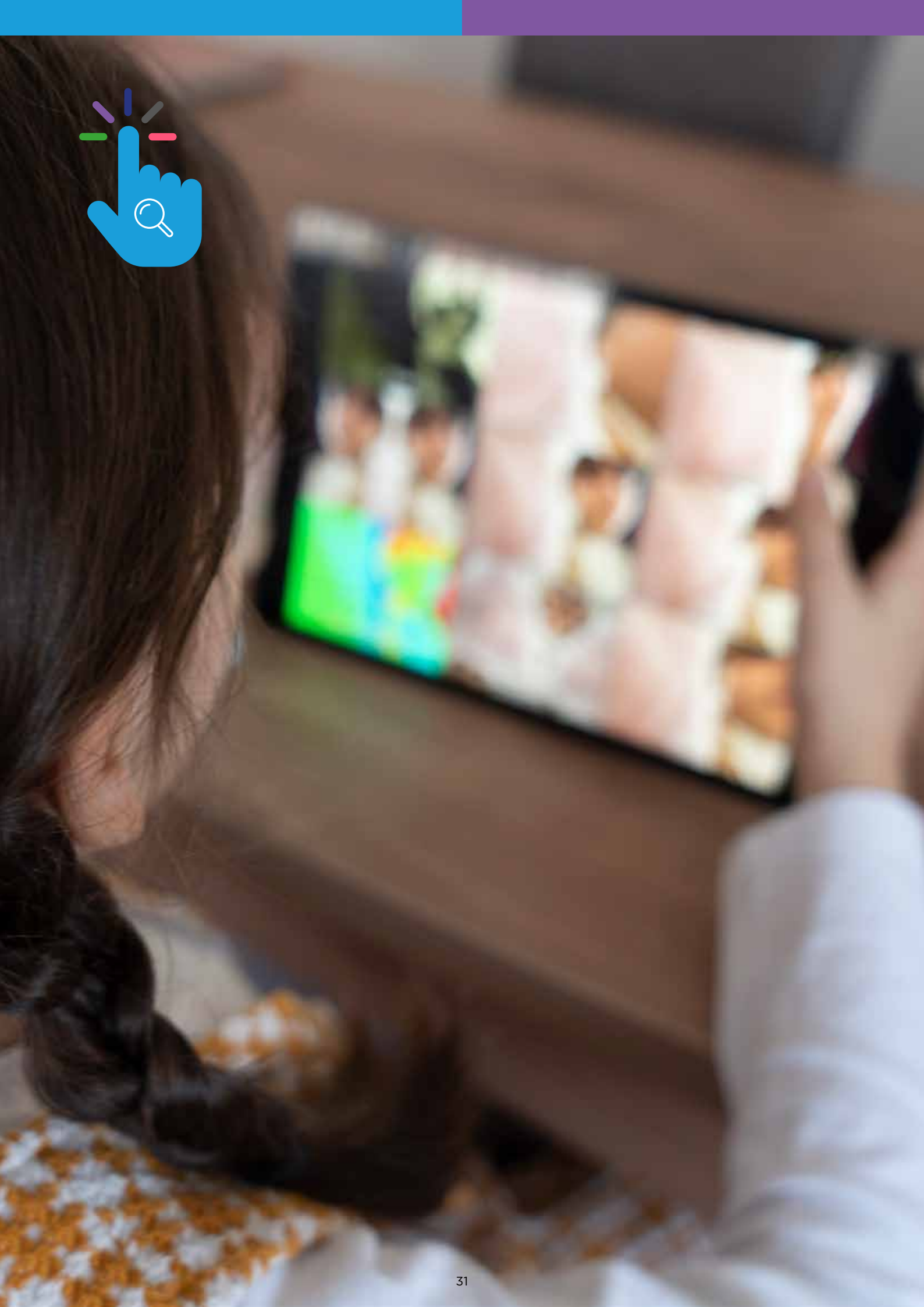
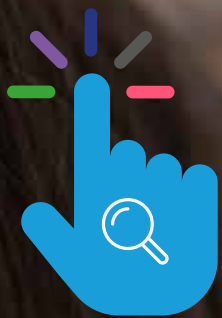
Summary

The findings from this chapter show that practitioners use a variety of tools to support their work with children and young people, aside from specific training with **42% (n=243) of survey respondents reporting that they have accessed other children and young people’s online safety resources to aid their learning and development in the last 2 years**. The top 3 online safety resources accessed by survey respondents in the last 2 years are as follows:

- Online resources are the most frequently accessed resource used by practitioners with 88% of survey respondents rating them as very or quite effective
- Internal policies and procedures in their organisations are also accessed frequently, with a lower figure (66%) of survey respondents finding them effective
- 75% of survey respondents who reported having accessed additional resources have accessed the SBNI Online Safety Hub with most of those respondents rating it as very or quite effective

Survey respondents have also accessed bulletins/newsletters/regular emails, apps and text updates and alerts with more varied ratings of effectiveness.

In identifying specific effective online safety resources, survey respondents gave multiple examples of resources in a variety of formats and from a range of providers (see Appendix 1).



5 Online safety training needs and priorities

In order to ascertain the online safety training needs and priorities of the children's workforce, it was important to establish what practitioners consider to be the main issues affecting children and young people's online safety and what the challenges are facing the workforce in better understanding, identifying and responding to children's online safety.

Issues affecting children and young people's online safety

The survey asked respondents to identify the top 8 issues affecting children and young people's online safety, based on their professional experience, from a list developed through findings from the interviews stage and consultation with SBNI. Figure 8 and Table 6 below show the top issues affecting children and young people's online safety, as identified by survey respondents (n=537) in their professional experience.



Figure 8

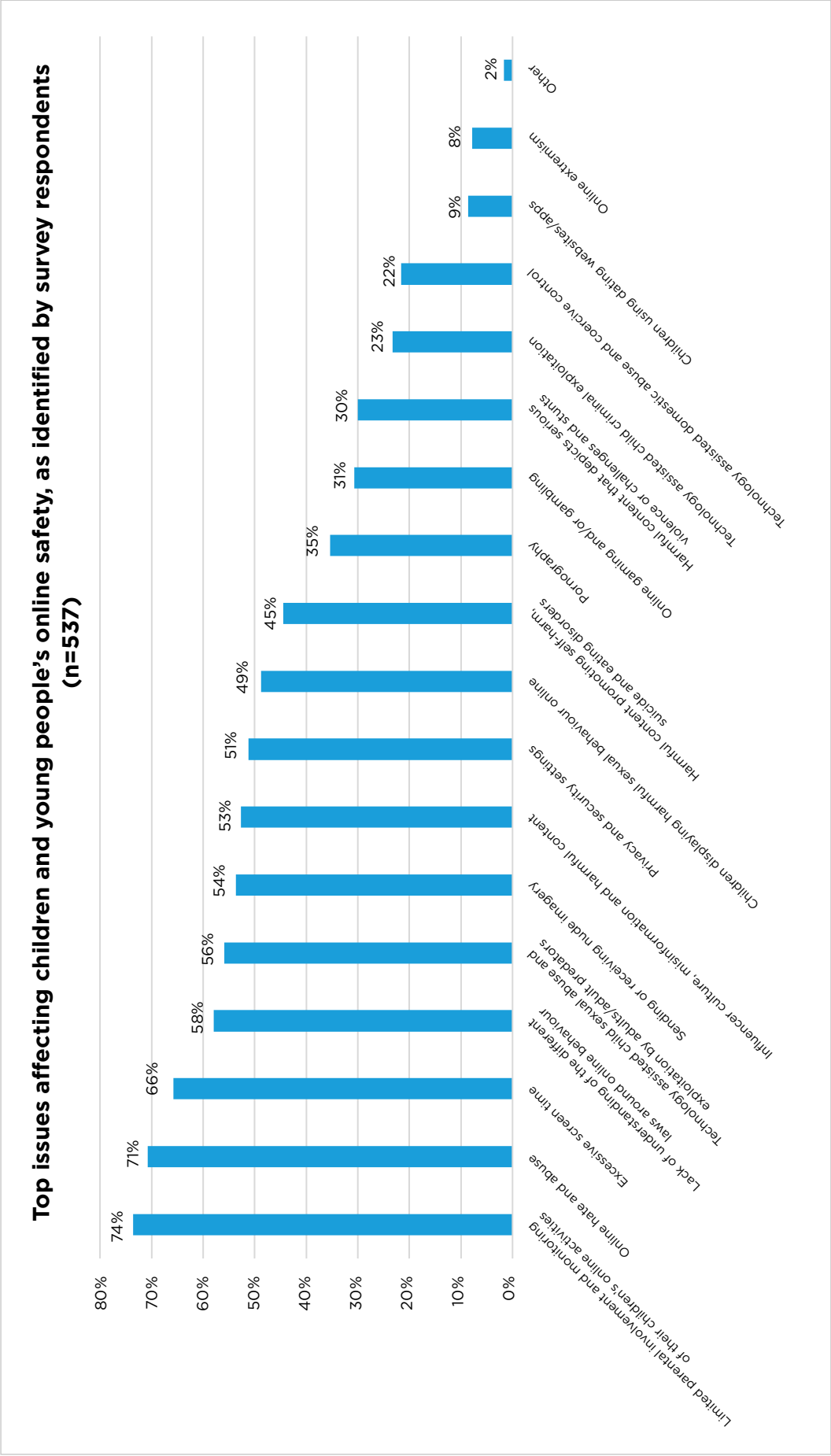


Table 6

Issues affecting children and young people's online safety as identified by survey respondents		Percentage of total survey responses (n=537)
1.	Limited parental involvement and monitoring of their children's online activities	74% (n=395)
2.	Online hate and abuse (cyberbullying, trolling, sectarianism, hurtful communication between children)	71% (n=380)
3.	Excessive screen time	66% (n=353)
4.	Lack of understanding of the different laws around online behaviour (sharing images, age restrictions)	58% (n=311)
5.	Technology assisted child sexual abuse and exploitation by adults/adult predators (catfishing, grooming, encouraging a child to send indecent sexual images or engage in sexual activity, sextortion etc.)	56% (n=300)
6.	Sending or receiving nude imagery	54% (n=288)
7.	Influencer culture, misinformation and harmful content (promoting misogyny, gender-based violence and abuse and unrealistic beauty standards)	53% (n=283)
8.	Privacy and security settings (location sharing, parental controls)	51% (n=275)
9.	Children displaying harmful sexual behaviour online (developmentally inappropriate use of pornography, sending sexually explicit messages or imagery, online sexual abuse, grooming)	49% (n=262)
10.	Harmful content promoting self-harm, suicide and eating disorders	45% (n=239)
11.	Pornography	35% (n=190)
12.	Online gaming and/or gambling	31% (n=165)
13.	Harmful content that depicts serious violence or challenges and stunts	30% (n=161)
14.	Technology assisted child criminal exploitation (coercing, manipulating or deceiving a child or young person into any criminal activity)	23% (n=125)
15.	Technology assisted domestic abuse and coercive control (cyberstalking, monitoring/tracking, image-based sexual abuse)	22% (n=116)
16.	Children using dating websites/apps	9% (n=46)
17.	Online extremism	8% (n=42)
18.	Other	0.5% (n=3)
Source – Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025		

The top 8 issues affecting children and young people's safety identified by survey respondents in the children's workforce are listed below.

1. **Limited parental involvement and monitoring of their children's online activities** – reported by 74% of survey respondents (n=395)
2. **Online hate and abuse (cyberbullying, trolling, sectarianism, hurtful communication between children)** – reported by 71% of survey respondents (n=380)
3. **Excessive screen time** – reported by 66% of survey respondents (n=353)
4. **Lack of understanding of the different laws around online behaviour (e.g. sharing images, age restrictions)** – reported by 58% of survey respondents (n=311)
5. **Technology assisted child sexual abuse and exploitation by adults/adult predators (catfishing, grooming, encouraging a child to send indecent sexual images or engage in sexual activity, sextortion etc.)** – reported by 56% of survey respondents (n=300)
6. **Sending or receiving nude imagery** – reported by 54% of survey respondents (n=288)
7. **Influencer culture, misinformation and harmful content (promoting misogyny, gender-based violence and abuse and unrealistic beauty standards)** – reported by 53% of survey respondents (n=283)
8. **Privacy and security settings (e.g. location sharing, parental controls)** – reported by 51% of survey respondents (n=275)

A small number of survey respondents provided 'other' issues that affect children's online safety (n=3). These included **AI-generated content**, an emerging and contentious issue, **lack of policies and procedures on online safety in foster care** and **schools posting images of children on social media**.

Challenges facing the workforce

A list of challenges facing the workforce was compiled through consultation with individuals recommended by the SBNI's Online Safety Committee at the interviews stage and with SBNI. The survey then asked respondents to indicate the extent to which these challenges exist for them in their roles in better understanding, identifying and responding to children's online safety.

Figure 9 and Table 7 below show the top issues affecting children and young people's online safety, as identified by survey respondents in their professional experience.

Figure 9

Challenges facing the workforce in better understanding, identifying and responding to children's online safety, as identified by survey respondents, and the extent to which these challenges exist in their roles

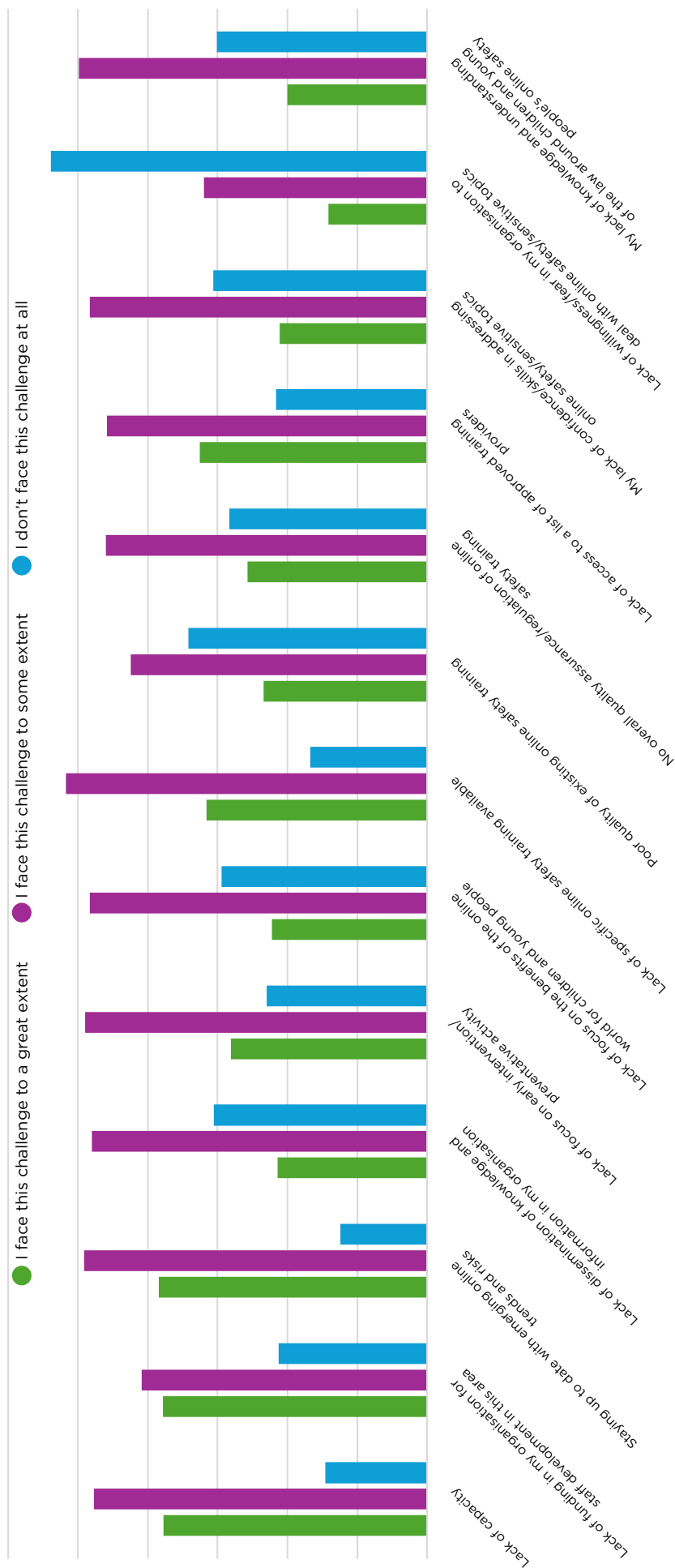


Table 7

Challenges facing the workforce in better understanding, identifying and responding to children's online safety, and the extent to which these challenges exist in survey respondent's roles (n=479)				
	I face this challenge to a great extent	I face this challenge to some extent	I don't face this challenge at all	Total
Lack of capacity	38% (n=179)	48% (n=226)	15% (n=69)	474
Lack of funding in my organisation for staff development in this area	38% (n=176)	41% (n=190)	21% (n=99)	465
Staying up to date with emerging online trends and risks	38% (n=183)	49% (n=234)	12% (n=59)	476
Lack of dissemination of knowledge and information in my organisation	21% (n=101)	48% (n=226)	31% (n=144)	471
Lack of focus on early intervention/preventative activity	28% (n=132)	49% (n=230)	23% (n=108)	470
Lack of focus on the benefits of the online world for children and young people	22% (n=105)	48% (n=228)	29% (n=139)	472
Lack of specific online safety training available	32% (n=149)	52% (n=244)	17% (n=79)	472
Poor quality of existing online safety training	23% (n=108)	42% (n=196)	34% (n=158)	462
No overall quality assurance/regulation of online safety training	26% (n=118)	46% (n=211)	28% (n=130)	459
Lack of access to a list of approved training providers	33% (n=152)	46% (n=214)	22% (n=101)	467
My lack of confidence/skills in addressing online safety/sensitive topics	21% (n=98)	48% (n=224)	31% (n=142)	464
Lack of willingness/fear in my organisation to deal with online safety/sensitive topics	14% (n=66)	32% (n=149)	54% (n=251)	466
My lack of knowledge and understanding of the law around children and young people's online safety	20% (n=93)	50% (n=232)	30% (n=140)	465
Source – Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025				

It is clear from the above information that **the majority of survey respondents have faced most of the above challenges to a great or to some extent**. The only exception being that 54% of survey respondents reported that they did not face the challenge of a lack of willingness/fear in their organisations to deal with online safety/sensitive topics. Each of the challenges is addressed below:

Staying up to date with emerging online trends and risks (e.g. platforms, apps, online dangers) – The largest amount of survey respondents (87%, n=417) reported staying up to date as a challenge they face in their roles to some or to a great extent.

“There are so many aspects to online safety and [it is] impossible for schools and teachers to be expected to keep up, particularly when it sits outside of curriculum” (survey respondent)

“Limited circulation of decent, up to date and relevant training and publications on online safety for children and young people. Trends emerge so quickly and this is hard to keep up with” (survey respondent)

“Online safety is an area that is continually progressing and moving at a rate of knots. So it's trying to keep up to speed with that” (interview participant)

While this was raised as a challenge by many survey respondents, some respondents expressed that they felt somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of information shared on online safety,

“There is more information shared about online safety than any other safeguarding issue. Learning around the core areas would be better than constantly new information about apps/gaming devices. Quality over quantity” (survey respondent)

Lack of capacity (staff time/resources) – 86% (n=405) of survey respondents reported this as a challenge they face in their roles to some extent or to a great extent. This challenge is linked to staying up to date with emerging online trends and having the capacity to be aware of what risks the young people they are working with are being exposed to and the skill to manage and respond to those risks.

Lack of specific online safety training – 84% of survey respondents (n=393) reported that a lack of specific online safety training is a challenge they face in their roles to some extent or to a great extent.

“I believe all organisations should be doing a yearly online safety workshop with yearly refreshers of new trends or what the main focus is for that time” (survey respondent)

“Lack of youth work-specific training” (survey respondent)

“There is an ongoing focus on issues in relation to for example fraud and online safety of Information within our organisation but no training with regards to children's safety online” (survey respondent)

Several survey respondents noted that a challenge facing them is a lack of specific training for supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities on their online safety.

“Lack of training and development and curriculum resources for pupils with SEN and SLD” (survey respondent)

“No tailored support for SEN and severe learning difficulties” (survey respondent)

“Lack of focus for special schools, it requires tailored, age and developmentally appropriate training and resources” (survey respondent)

The need for specific online safety training for different roles was reflected in the interviews, with participants noting that practitioners working with young people with SEND or looked after children might need tailored training to address the particular needs or vulnerabilities of the young people that they work with.

Some survey respondents also reported that a challenge facing them in their roles is a lack of training on specific online safety topics such as the use of artificial intelligence, and how to manage the use of mobile phones to record videos or take photographs to share of peers or teachers in school.

“Not enough training on how to maximise AI safely” (survey respondent)

“Staying up to date with developing technology such as AI and how this affects children online” (survey respondent)

“Clear advice about what to do when children share pics, video in changing rooms, record fights, record teachers arguing with pupils, take photos of teachers cars”
(survey respondent)

Lack of funding in my organisation for staff development in this area – 79% of survey respondents (n=366) reported that a lack of funding is a challenge they face in their organisations to some extent or to a great extent. This challenge was also identified by a voluntary sector organisation that was consulted during the interview stage of this research.

“There is no funding in youth clubs to pay for training so we rely on free L&D [learning and development]. We got quotes from some providers and they are really expensive”
(survey respondent)

Lack of access to a list of approved training providers – 79% of survey respondents (n=366) reported that a lack of access to a list of approved training providers is a challenge for them in their roles to some extent or a great extent.

“Department of Education and Education Authority should have contracted list of suppliers to deliver free quality assured and evaluated CPD training that every education setting can avail of” (survey respondent)

Lack of focus on early intervention/preventative activity – 77% of survey respondents (n=362) reported that a lack of focus on early intervention/preventative activity is a challenge for them in their roles to some extent or a great extent. This reflects what came up in the interviews with participants noting that robust systems need to be set up *“to address this early intervention and strong preventative foundation and creating a whole school approach”* (interview participant).

“Early intervention isn’t possible because there’s no money for it” (survey respondent)

No overall quality assurance/regulation of online safety training – 72% of survey respondents (n=329) reported that they faced this challenge to some extent or to a great extent.

“There’s a total lack of regulation. Schools and other orgs going directly to private organisations who have no quality assured training - mostly terrifying children, families and professionals about online reputation and impact on career etc...CPD training for public sector must be quality assured and evaluated” (survey respondent)

“Lack of regulation of private training providers who deliver inconsistent (and often) wrong education and advice to schools and parents. There is no quality assurance which is the biggest challenge. Schools don’t know who to turn to and often independently approach private providers to engage directly with families and there continues to be mis-messaging and scaremongering” (survey respondent)

“If training is required then can I recommend that DENI or EA create a learning resource accessible to all NI teachers and SLTs. The constant stream of private suppliers selling expensive safeguarding training directly to schools and parents is wrong and needs regulated”
(survey respondent)

“Regulation and reassurance that government funded resources are quality assured is the start of a long journey. A list of quality assured providers is absolutely necessary to avoid public monies and staff time going to waste” (survey respondent)

Lack of focus on the benefits of the online world for children and young people (too much focus on negative aspects) – 70% of survey respondents (n=325) reported that they face this challenge to some or a great extent. It is interesting that some survey respondents have reported (see above) that training they have experienced has had a more negative focus on children’s use of the internet, using words such as “terrifying”, “scaremongering” and “scary”. This reflects comments in the interviews with a participant noting that empowering children and young people with digital resilience from an early age gives them an ability to apply critical thinking skills to their use of the internet, acting as a preventative online safety tool.

“If you look at countries in Europe where they have like a digital literacy from age 3, it’s ...around empowerment of being able to interrogate it [the internet] as a product, as a service” (interview participant)

My lack of knowledge and understanding of the law around children and young people’s online safety – 70% of survey respondents (n=325) reported that they face this challenge to some extent or to a great extent. Survey respondents noted that laws around online safety can be confusing, with one respondent noting that the age of consent in Northern Ireland is 16 years old, however, children at that age cannot send nude images. This echoes what was mentioned in the interviews, with a participant noting that *“there are certain aspects of legislation people don’t really have a full understanding of...you can be 16 and 17 years old and be in a consensual sexual relationship with somebody...However, if you’re 16 or 17 years old...and he’s 18, you can’t be sending sexual images to each other...There’s an offence committed there”* (interview participant).

Lack of dissemination of knowledge and information in my organisation – 69% of survey respondents (n=327) reported that they face the challenge of lack of dissemination of knowledge and information in their organisations to some or to a great extent. This reflects what was communicated in the interviews.

“Management not sharing information even when they are involved in it... information is not shared internally” (survey respondent)

“Some of the schools will have great systems and processes in place whereby...they’re constantly, you know upskilling with their training...delivered by CPSS and it’s at a senior leadership level. But that isn’t always descending...down to further staff within the school” (interview participant)

My lack of confidence/skills in addressing online safety/sensitive topics – 69% of survey respondents (n=322) reported facing this challenge to some or a great extent. Some survey respondents reported that they were not as skilled in the online environment which would have an impact on their confidence in addressing online safety with young people. They also noted that it is hard to have all of the knowledge required for such a wide and ever-changing topic.

“As an older person I am not as skilled on the online environment” (survey respondent)

“This is such a wide area that it is hard to have all the knowledge to hand when a parent asks you some[thing] specific. Somewhere to signpost... to for advice/support would be good” (survey respondent)

This reflects some feedback in the interviews,

“Our young people, they want to talk about these topics, they want to address them... but that’s not to say that staff are comfortable to address them” (interview participant)

“We have to remember, we are digital immigrants trying to work with digital natives and we’re trying to learn and teach at the same time” (interview participant)

Poor quality of existing online safety training – 65% of survey respondents (n=304) reported facing this challenge to some or to a great extent. Some respondents referred to the lack of quality assurance of private providers and that the training had a negative focus, as mentioned above. Survey respondents also mentioned that feedback they had received on online safety training from external providers was poor.

Lack of willingness/fear in my organisation to deal with online safety/sensitive topics – While this is the challenge reported the least by survey respondents, it is a concern that has been reported by 46% (n=214) of survey respondents, to some or to a great extent. A survey respondent noted that organisation confidence in dealing with children who break the law online often prohibits a safeguarding led response.

“Organisation confidence around dealing with children who break the law online often prohibits a safeguarding led response. Children are bound to make mistakes, yet the threat of punitive measures by the police and other law enforcement is preventing victims from coming forward” (survey respondent)

Interview participants raised this as an issue, particularly in describing different approaches to preventative work on tackling the issues of online safety within schools. They described schools that are ***“happy to tackle any difficult and sensitive issue... playing videos [to] the whole school”*** and others where ***“the lack of a preventative approach is a big issue”***, suggesting that some schools can be ***“uncomfortable with certain issues”*** (interview participant).

Another challenge to the workforce identified by a number of survey respondents is the lack of parental involvement in their children’s online safety. Survey respondents noted that the online safety messages being delivered by practitioners are not always reinforced at home.

“There is a lack of parental support in monitoring what young people are accessing and there should be more cohesion between schools and parents about what they are accessing” (survey respondent)

“The message is not landing with parents re the dangers of not only what young people access online but the affect this continued exposure to phones (tech) is having on their brains - affecting attention spans, critical thinking etc.” (survey respondent)

“Schools do struggle and find it quite challenging... in working with both parents as well and helping parents see where their role and responsibility is in this and upskilling the parents and raising their awareness of the impact” (interview participant)

Survey respondents also identified that a lack of online safety education available directly to parents and students is a challenge for the workforce, to ensure that awareness is shared with the young people and those that support them.

“I think there should be FREE online trainers to deliver workshops to children and parents on a regular basis” (survey respondent)

“I think the main challenge is trying to get the children to see things from our perspective, with the knowledge of the harms we know exist” (survey respondent)

This challenge was also identified in the interviews, with a participant noting that the main risk for children online is the lack of parental involvement in managing devices and managing access,

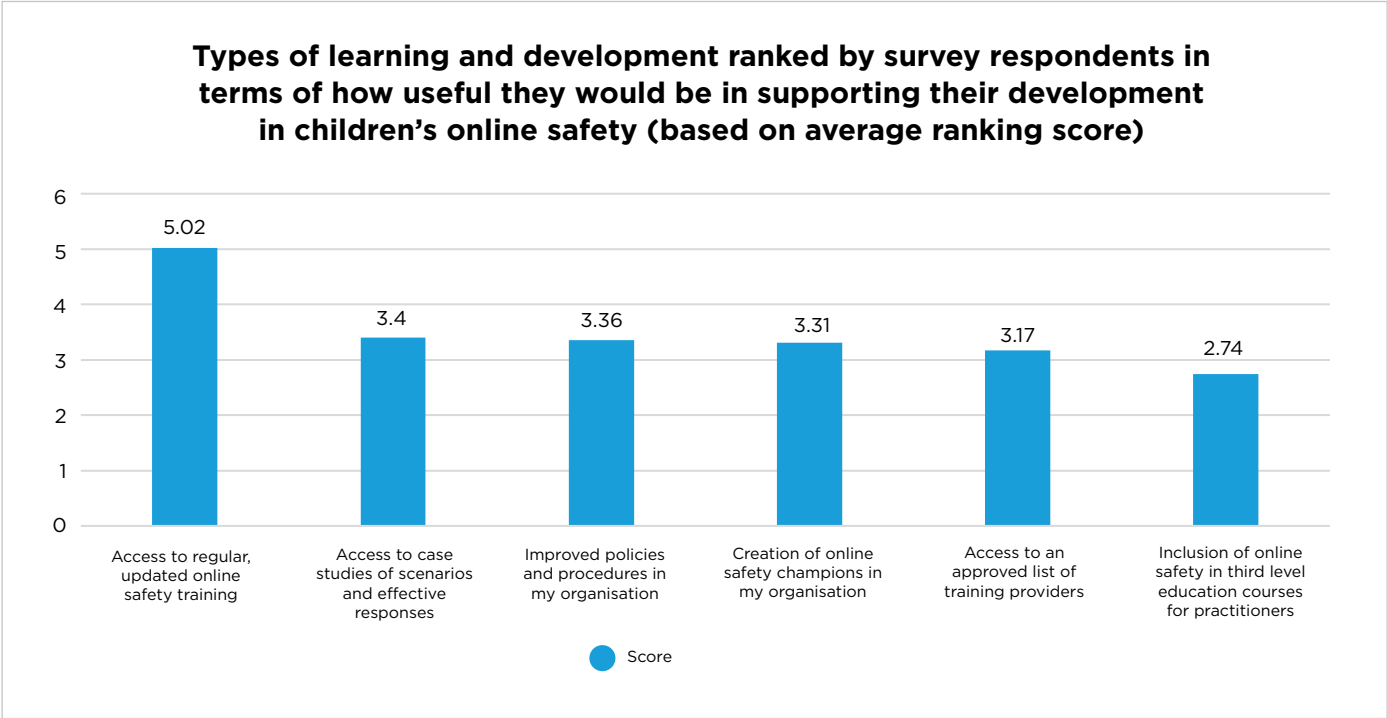
“If we look at where the main risk for children online, it’s around the behaviour of the parents around managing devices and managing access. So our main focus... for children and young people [is] around reflecting on their use and managing that if their parents are not managing it with them... managing the risks as opposed to being experts in every piece of technology because the technology will change, the risk will change”
(interview participant)

Finally, survey respondents reported that a challenge for them in their roles is the lack of policies in the Health & Social Care Trusts for foster carers in relation to online safety or mobile phones. This aligns with comments in the interviews with a participant noting that a challenge for foster carers is a lack of policies and procedures on what to do when they have concerns regarding a child’s use of the internet or mobile phones, *“having an understanding of clear policies to help manage risk, when can they remove a device etc”* (interview participant).

Online safety learning and development needs

In identifying the online safety training needs of the children’s workforce, the survey asked respondents to rank a list of 6 types of learning and development in terms of how useful they would be in supporting their development in children’s online safety. An average ranking score was calculated for each answer choice in order to evaluate the most preferred option, with the largest score indicating the most preferred type of learning and development and the lowest score indicating the least preferred type of learning and development³. Figure 10 and Table 8 below show the most to least useful types of learning and development in supporting their development in children’s online safety, ranked by survey respondents.

Figure 10



³ The respondent’s most preferred choice (ranked as number 1) has the largest weight of 6, and the least preferred choice (ranked in the last position) has a weight of 1. The average ranking score is calculated by taking an average of these scores for each answer choice.

Table 8

Types of learning and development ranked by survey respondents in terms of how useful they would be in supporting their development in children's online safety (n=457)							
	1 (most useful)	2	3	4	5	6 (least useful)	Average ranking score
Access to regular, updated online safety training	40% (n=183)	33% (n=149)	19% (n=88)	5% (n=25)	2% (n=10)	0% (n=2)	5.02
Access to case studies of scenarios and effective responses	8% (n=38)	16% (n=74)	20% (n=93)	28% (n=128)	17% (n=76)	11% (n=48)	3.4
Improved policies and procedures in my organisation	16% (n=72)	12% (n=56)	18% (n=80)	18% (n=84)	19% (n=86)	17% (n=79)	3.36
Creation of online safety champions in my organisation	16% (n=75)	15% (n=67)	14% (n=62)	14% (n=65)	21% (n=98)	20% (n=90)	3.31
Access to an approved list of training providers	12% (n=57)	16% (n=72)	16% (n=74)	15% (n=67)	14% (n=64)	27% (n=123)	3.17
Inclusion of online safety in third level education courses for practitioners	7% (n=32)	9% (n=39)	13% (n=60)	19% (n=88)	27% (n=123)	25% (n=115)	2.74
Source – Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025							

The type of learning and development highest ranked by survey respondents is **access to regular, updated online safety training with 40% of survey respondents (n=183) ranking it as their most useful type of learning and development**. This reflects the top 3 challenges as identified by survey respondents above: staying up to date with emerging online trends and risks; lack of capacity (staff time and resources); and lack of specific online safety training available.

Following this, access to case studies of scenarios and effective responses, improved organisation policies and procedures, recreation of online safety champions in their organisations and access to an approved list of training providers all scored similarly in the weighted ranking.

A holistic and consistent approach to learning and development was recommended by survey respondents which covered more than one format:

“Mandatory awareness training on an annual basis at least, to change with the developments in laws/policies and case studies. To take a holistic approach to learning about online safety to encourage a balanced viewpoint and grow confidence addressing it - teaching adults through multiple sources of information, case studies, and understanding basic internet access issues that could help prevent over exposure to inappropriate and harmful content online for young people. Being a better informed adult will help assist children and young person's safety”

(survey respondent)

The creation of online safety champions in organisations was ranked at number 1 by 16% of survey respondents (n=75) however some survey respondents advocated caution with this type of learning and development, from their experience,

“We have tried online safety champions in our school, but they have not worked”

(survey respondent)

Inclusion of online safety in third level education courses for practitioners scored the least, however, it should be noted that this was raised in the interviews stage as a part of training and skills development that could have more focus on children’s online safety, particularly in teacher training colleges, college of policing, social work degrees, youth work degrees, nursing degrees and law degrees. This was reflected in some survey responses,

“I would be supportive of this [online safety] being included in training future nurses across all parts of the register” (survey respondent)

In terms of specific online safety training, again some interview participants and survey respondents referred to the need for parents to be educated on their children’s online safety.

“Schools do struggle and find it quite challenging... in working with both parents as well and helping parents see where their role and responsibility is in this and upskilling the parents and raising their awareness of the impact.” (interview participant)

Survey respondents suggested educating parents with practical strategies to support children and young people’s online safety. In contrast, other survey respondents reported on problems that they have in offering training to parents,

“We organise learning events for parents/carers but they don’t bother coming, we send them emails/newsletters etc, but they aren’t involved in their kids online lives”

(survey respondent)

Other survey respondents reported that the online safety of vulnerable children, whether they have special educational needs, neurodiversity or are in the care system, needs to be taken seriously in organisational policies and procedures and in the focus of any training provided to practitioners working with them.

Summary

The findings in this chapter explore what practitioners consider to be the main issues affecting children and young people’s online safety and the challenges facing the workforce in better understanding, identifying and responding to those issues. The online safety learning and development needs and priorities of the workforce have also been explored.

Issues affecting children and young people’s online safety

The top issue affecting children and young people’s online safety, identified by 74% of respondents, was limited parental involvement in/monitoring of children’s online activities. Following this, the other key issues identified are online harm and abuse (e.g. trolling, cyberbullying, sectarianism, hurtful communication between children), excessive screen time, lack of understanding of the laws around online behaviour (e.g. sharing images, age restrictions) and technology-assisted child sexual abuse/exploitation.

These findings align with the content areas covered by existing training, particularly online sexual abuse, harm and bullying however, there was no mention of excessive screen time or supporting parents to monitor/support their child’s online activities in the information on training content provided by respondents.

Challenges facing the workforce

The survey findings show that the workforce experiences multiple challenges regarding online safety for children and young people. All the challenges listed were confirmed as issues for respondents, with very little separating each in terms of ranking. Only 'lack of willingness/fear within the organisation to deal with online safety/sensitive topics' emerged as a lower issue for many. Challenges include lack of capacity and funding to support development; difficulty staying up to date with emerging trends, dissemination of information within organisations, lack of focus on the benefits of the online world, poor quality or lack of quality assurance, lack of knowledge and confidence, and many other issues.

Respondents also reported overwhelm at the amount of information in an ever-changing environment and specific requirements in relation to discrete groups of children and young people and their specific needs. One observation on the lack of training/information available to parents speaks to the concern above around a lack of parental engagement.

Online safety learning and development needs

Respondents' top preference in terms of types of online safety learning and development is for access to regular, updated online safety training. This aligns with the issues and challenges summarised above. All other suggested learning and development support, including case studies on how to appropriately deal with a range of scenarios, improved organisational policies, online safety champions, access to approved training list and third-level course content for practitioners, were also considered valuable.

As with the learning above, the workforce is open to multi-faceted support in this area. Indeed, qualitative feedback referred several times to the need for 'holistic' training and support, that recognises how online safety is embedded across children's lives and experiences.

A holistic and consistent approach to learning and development was recommended by survey respondents and the need for parents to be educated on their children's online safety was again raised.

Other survey respondents reported that the online safety of vulnerable children, whether they have special educational needs, neurodiversity or are in the care system, needs to be taken seriously in organisational policies and procedures and in the focus of any training provided to practitioners working with them.



6 Conclusions

This online safety training needs analysis across those working with, and on behalf of, children and young people in Northern Ireland, has explored the current provision of online safety training for practitioners and resources and activities used. The analysis has also identified the main issues facing children and young people in their online safety, the challenges facing the workforce in supporting them and their online safety learning and development needs.

Key takeaways from the analysis are summarised below.

Relevance of online safety training

This is clearly an issue that is relevant across sectors, organisations and across the breadth of roles within the children and young people's sector. Training is not limited to frontline practitioners but delivered to the children and young people's workforce across a range of roles and areas of expertise. It has widespread relevance, for those working in health, education, social care, youth justice and beyond. **There is clearly a focus on the importance of online safety for all those working with children and young people, and this should continue to be promoted.**

While the age range of children supported by respondents was not considered more widely, the breakdown by age group from the education sector shows that within education, there was higher engagement in the survey from those working in post-primary and further education sectors, with the primary and early years sector having less representation. This may be due to lack of engagement with the survey, rather than lack of relevance of the topic. **Further research is required to consider whether there is a stronger focus on online safety for those working with older age groups, and if so, how training can be adapted for younger groups.**

Availability of online safety training

There are numerous training opportunities available, online, face to face, and via hybrid methods. These opportunities are widely accessed, across sectors and areas of work, with respondents reporting a range of sources. However, just under half of survey respondents (46%) reported having received no online safety training in the past two years, and only 125 of the full survey sample (18%) had undertaken standalone online safety training, rather than the topic being covered as part of wider safeguarding training. As the survey sample contained a significant proportion of frontline practitioners, this finding is concerning.

Qualitative feedback provided shows that while there are a wide range of sources considered to be effective and valuable, the workforce is confused by where/how to access training. They are concerned at the quality of training available, particularly via private sector delivery organisations, and seeking guidance as to which sources to trust. Concerns were also raised at lack of funding available to support the workforce to undertake such training. **Guidance on good quality training, and funding to access this regularly, would be valued by the workforce.**

Content and focus of online safety training

The content and focus of training varies widely, however using the 'Four C's' of online safety classification (Content, Contact, Conduct, Commerce), the top four areas of focus sit within the content and contact classification. From the feedback received, there are key areas covered by the majority of training. These include child sexual abuse and exploitation, online harm and abuse, accessing harmful content, grooming and online bullying. Issues falling under 'commerce', such as phishing/scamming, online gaming and gambling, were least likely to be covered.

Qualitative feedback across the range of training considered effective by participants highlights a variety of topics covered, both with a safeguarding focus and considering day to day developments and issues facing children, such as AI, gaming, digital literacy and resilience. Conversely, some respondents reflected a concern that online safety training can focus on the 'scary' headline issues, rather than these day-to-day issues affecting children and young people. **Given the changing nature of technology, the workforce is keen to be kept up to date with emerging issues and themes, and to learn how to support young people with these, alongside the more serious issues.**

Other sources of support

Formal online safety training is not the only source of support, with survey respondents reporting a wide range of other resources accessed. The SBNI Online Safety Hub is a key source of information for many and considered effective. It also provides the opportunity to signpost to other quality sources of information, therefore is an important and useful resource. Respondents also commonly noted reference to internal policies on online safety to support their work.

Other key resources accessed by many and found to be effective include briefings and information sessions, ebulletins, newsletters and regular emails. Interestingly, apps were not considered effective by many of those who had accessed them. Regular resources provide an opportunity to supplement the information provided via formal training and are also an ideal way to stay up to date with changing trends and new developments. **Practitioners should therefore be supported to identify and access a range of quality-assured information.**

A particular concern running through qualitative feedback regarding other resources is the lack of specific focus on children with special education needs or learning difficulties. **Tailored resources to support those working with children and young people with SEN would be valuable.**

Issues affecting young people's safety

The top issue, identified by 74% of respondents, was limited parental involvement in/ monitoring of children's online activities. Following this, the other key issues identified are online harm and abuse (e.g. trolling, cyberbullying), excessive screen time, lack of understanding of the laws around online behaviour, and technology-assisted child sexual abuse/exploitation. There is clear cross-over in these findings and the content areas covered by training – importantly online sexual abuse, harm and bullying. This suggests that training is focused on the key areas that are important to, and of concern for, the workforce. While there was no mention of excessive screen time or supporting parents to monitor/support their child's online activities, it is clear these are of concern. **A mapping of workforce, and indeed parent and child concerns, against training content, is a critical step in training development to ensure the content matches real-life concerns and issues. Co-production of training resources and packages would maximise the usefulness and relevance of these for the target audience.**

Challenges facing the workforce

It is clear from the survey findings that the workforce experiences multiple challenges regarding online safety for children and young people. All of the challenges listed were confirmed as issues for respondents, with very little separating each in terms of ranking. Only 'lack of willingness/fear within the organisation to deal with online safety/sensitive topics' emerged as a lower issue for many. Challenges include lack of capacity and funding to support development; difficulty staying up to date with emerging trends, dissemination of information within organisations, lack of focus on the benefits of the online world, poor quality or lack of quality assurance, lack of knowledge and confidence, and many other issues.

Qualitative feedback provides some further detail on each of these, with respondents reporting overwhelm at the amount of information in an ever-changing environment, lack of funding available to purchase quality training, specific requirements in relation to discrete groups of children and young people and their specific needs. An observation on the lack of training/information available to parents speaks to the concern above around a lack of parental engagement.

Despite the wide range of online safety training and support available, a wide range of concerns still exist. Therefore, more needs to be done to best support the workforce, and therefore children and young people and those that support them, building on the range of training available, and listening to the views of the workforce to best address challenges.

Learning and development needs

Unsurprisingly, respondents expressed a top preference for access to regular, updated online safety training as the key focus of learning and development. This aligns with the issues and challenges summarised above. All other suggested learning and development support, including case studies on how to appropriately deal with a range of scenarios, improved organisational policies, online safety champions, access to approved training list and third-level course content for practitioners, were also considered valuable.

As with the learning above, the workforce is open to multi-faceted support in this area. Indeed, qualitative feedback referred several times to the need for 'holistic' training and support, that recognises how online safety is embedded across children's lives and experiences.

Online safety is not a 'one size fits all' issue, therefore training and resources must build a suite of support to meet the range of needs and audiences and reflect the real-life situations for children and young people. Importantly, the workforce is keen that this includes emphasis on the positive benefits of the online world, as well as the challenges.

Conclusion

Online safety is a universal concern for the children and young people's workforce across all sectors and areas of work. While there are many formal and informal training, learning and development resources available, the workforce remains concerned at how they can best support children, young people and families that they work with.

There is a common concern around knowing which resources to trust in terms of quality; a struggle to balance the content focus between the headline dangers experienced by the minority, versus the day-to-day experiences of the majority (absolutely recognising the need for both); and the ever-changing online world developments.

Access to quality training, alongside regularly updated informal but quality-assessed resources, and critically, the funds to access these, are essential. Collaborative approaches to developing resources, alongside the workforce, children, young people and parents, will ensure that they remain aligned to real-world challenges and meet ongoing needs. The number of responses, and qualitative insights given, demonstrate a passion to keep children and young people safe online, while also ensuring they can make the most of the opportunities that the online world brings.



Appendix 1

Effective resources identified by survey respondents (n=145)

Source	Number of survey responses
Barnardos - Girl/Boy talk	2
Barnardo's advice	1
BBC	2
BBC - Teen Predator documentary	1
British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) publications	1
Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) resources	10
Child psychologist social media posts on proposed boundaries from a parent perspective	1
Childline	1
Childnet	5
Children in Need	1
Common Sense Media	1
cyberawarekids.org	1
Cyberfirst resources	2
Cyber Safe Kids Ireland	2
EA C2K newsletters	1
EA CPSS newsletters	2
EA helpdesk updates	1
Family Link App	1
Fostering in a Digital World App	5
INEQE resources	4
Internet Matters	6
Lucy Faithful Foundation - "What's the Problem?"	1
Marie Collins Foundation resources	1
NISCC (NI Social Care Council)	1
NSPCC resources	19
NSPCC CASPAR newsletters	2
Other - Lack of resources for teachers/parents of children with SEND, SLD	4
Priory - A Guide to Keeping Children Safe Online	1
PSNI website	1
Purdy, N., Ballentine, M., Lyle, H., Orr, K., Symington, E., Webster, D., York, L., (2023) Growing Up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland An Evidence Based Report. Stranmillis University College.	1
Qustudio	1
RAYUELA	1
Resources from child's school	1

Safer Schools App	11
SBNI Online Safety Hub	21
School monthly newsletters	2
Self-learning on children's online safety - podcasts	1
SHSCT Safe 4 U resources	1
Smartphone Free Childhood	1
Social Work Toolbox site	2
Stop NCII.org	1
SWGfl (Safety & Security Online)	2
Thinkuknow website	2
Tooled Up Education	1
Trinh Nguyen, J., Brown, T., Yu, ML., (2023) The Relationship between Typically Developing School age Children's Screen Time, Participation and Physical Activity: An Exploratory Study. Sage Publications.	1
Twinkl	2
UK Safer Internet Centre	7
Volunteer Now resources	1
Wayne Denner resources	1
Welsh Hwb	1
YGam	1
YoungMind	1

Source - Online Safety Training Needs Analysis Survey 2025



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