

Document: Report of consultation with young people for NHS GG&C, 'Young people's attitudes to and experiences of consent: facilitators and barriers to recognising and communicating enthusiastic sexual consent'

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Summary

In July 2019, NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, on behalf of a partnership with NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Lothian, commissioned University of Edinburgh to carry out in-depth, qualitative research with young people aged 16-19 years.

The research sought to uncover young people's understandings of sexual consent and to explore how, in a practical way, a conceptual move towards affirmative or enthusiastic consent may be supported by the three NHS Boards. The key research question is as follows, with a range of subsidiary research questions in two main categories: personal experiences of and views on how sexual consent is communicated, in particular when this goes well; and views on the sort of film(s) that could be produced to influence or support positive practices with regard to sexual consent.

- What are the barriers and motivators for young people in relation to communicating and recognising enthusiastic mutual consent in sexual situations?

The research design was intended to maximise opportunities to refine and further check out emergent findings, within short-timescale work, and also to build communication, making young people feel as comfortable as possible in discussing a sensitive and personal area. There were three main elements:

- Co-production with young advisors who helped develop and pilot research tools
- Focus groups
- Individual interviews

Researchers talked to a total of 58 young people from youth organisations across the three Health Board areas with a diverse range of genders, sexualities and experiences (see full report for details of the sample).

Key insights from the research include:

On language, talking and learning

"The consent we got taught in school was like that tea video, it's very yes/no, black/white, whilst it's not like that in real life." (Young woman, bisexual)

- The language of 'sex positive', 'yes means yes' and 'enthusiastic sexual consent' was generally not recognised by or particularly meaningful for the young people consulted. 'Consent' was often discussed in its absence and negatively associated, with harassment, sexual assault and rape. The researchers' conversations with young people about positive experiences of sexual consent came to be framed in language such as 'good sexual communication' or 'when things are going well and everyone feels good – what does that look like?'



- Discomfort and embarrassment in talking about sex emerged as a clear barrier to positive sexual communication. This consultation therefore underlines the importance of normalising communication about consent in a range of social contexts (school, family, youth groups, peer groups), so that young people have both the language and the conviction to communicate in the moment.
- Many of the young people consulted were critical of the sex and relationships input that they had had, with denominational schools emerging as a particular area of weakness. New curriculum material seeks to address this but it will take time for it to influence young people of an age to be sexually active.

On communicating about consent

"[good communication is] both talking and both telling each other what they want and how they feel about it" (Young man, gay)

- Young people expressed varying experiences of communicating about sexual consent and sexual preferences with their partner or prospective partner outside of a sexual situation. While some young people described conversations confirming each other's intention to enter into sexual activity and discussing preferences, requests and/or red lines before any sexual activity, other young people suggested that this never happens and found the idea 'cringy'. Most young people who did have such conversations suggested that they were likely to take place online, citing the lack of face-to-face contact as an advantage because they did not have to see the other person's reactions.
- Young people's accounts of good sexual communication were very much focused on mutuality and reciprocity, with both partners being active participants. They also talked about being in tune with the body language, picking up on tension or avoidance, and verbal checking when moving to another stage and certainly if one partner is not sure of the other's willingness or enjoyment.
- Young people held varying views about how much of sexual communication is verbal and non-verbal and when explicit 'checking out' is necessary. While young people's communication needs, preferences and skills may vary, not all young people may have reflected on this variation and what this means for how they communicate with their partner. The researchers observed that, in this sample, young people involved in BDSM (variously, bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism and bondage/discipline, domination/submission and sadism/masochism) or kink 'scenes' and self-aware, autistic young people appeared to have paid the most attention to how they communicate in sexual situations.



On what influences and differentiates abilities to communicate

"It's just the like comfort factor, you know them so I think that fear that they could go back to someone and be like blah, blah, blah that's sort of like gone in your head 'cos you know them" (young man, gay)

- There was considerable agreement amongst young people on the barriers and facilitators of good sexual communication. Being young and inexperienced, not knowing your sexual partner well or being new to your partner, and being worried about your partner's response were the most commonly cited barriers. Normalising conversations about sex and consent, being older and more experienced, and being in a longer relationship were generally felt to be facilitators.
- Although the sample is too small to draw generalisable conclusions, the research suggests that experiences of, and attitudes to, sexual consent may vary across gender, sexuality and location. Despite a focus on mutuality when talking about positive sexual communication, there was still a common assumption amongst both males and females that, in heterosexual relationships, the responsibility lies with males to 'ask' for consent. Young people who do not identify as heterosexual expressed a more nuanced understanding of consent than heterosexual young people and tended to describe more explicit verbal communication about consent.
- Young people's accounts of their sexual experiences often referred in some way to peers, both positively and negatively. Positive peer influences would include friends challenging each other to think about consent, peers providing an opportunity to practice talking about sex or providing a sounding board against which to check out expectations. Some young people were worried about peers being told negative things about them, if they refused consent.

On saying and hearing 'no'

"Some people could see it as a rejection or like, some men could take it – I keep saying men but primarily it is men – that sort of feel entitled to like women, it's normally women." (Young woman, bisexual)

- Fear or anxieties about your sexual partner's response emerged strongly as a barrier to communication about consent. Young people were sometimes worried about being labelled, or their partner telling other people, or being 'huffy' or upset. This consultation therefore underlines the importance of how a sexual partner responds to 'no' or redirection, and suggests behaviours that can encourage openness, such as: responding neutrally; accepting that while some acts may go well others may not and that that is ok; or asking checking questions such as 'are you ok with this?', 'do you like that?'. Some young people (both male and female) were more able than others to weigh up their own desires and wellbeing against those of their sexual partner, and therefore to assert their own needs.



A message to your younger self

"It takes a lot of like courage as well I feel to talk about that sort of stuff and to be like open and know yourself so well to be able like then be like, this is what I want, this is what I like." (Young woman, heterosexual)

- Young people had a range of messages relative to sexual consent that they would wish to give to either their younger selves or to younger young people who are embarking on their first sexual experiences. These included 'know yourself', 'be truthful about what you feel', 'it's ok to wait' and 'speak to someone you trust' (in general – not necessarily your sexual partner).

On how to promote messages to young people on sexual consent

- Different young people are attracted to different types of films, promoting the concept of sexual consent. Some of these differences related to diversity and accessibility. For LGBTQ+ young people it is very important that films represent relationships that reflect their relationship experiences. Neurodiverse young people expressed clear needs in terms of the way that messages are presented, and many young people commented on the lack of disabled representation in the sample films used in the research. Other differences relate to style (humour, animation, live action etc.) and/or existing understanding of the issue (preference for a simple or nuanced message), which would potentially impact upon how young people would interact with a film on social media.
- There was full agreement that social media content needs to grab the attention of young people within two or three seconds or else they will simply scroll past or skip. Some ways that films could grab attention is through colour, music, text or a story that immediately pulls the viewer in or intrigues. It is also important to consider that many young people scroll through social media with their 'phones muted and, therefore, that soundtrack alone should not be relied upon.
- Most young people said that a film clip for social media should not be longer than a minute, with some saying that they would automatically skip a film that indicated it was longer than 30 seconds. However, others suggested that if a film clip was interesting – and particularly if it had a cliff-hanger – then they could be persuaded to 'click through' to a longer film.
- Young people from several groups talked about social media 'mini-series' where short clips of new content that form a story are released over a period of time. These work best where young people are invested in the story and want to know what happens next.
- Almost all young people said that they like to answer social media 'polls', especially where they are interested in the topic and they get to see how other people have answered the question. Some young people suggested that answering polls in particular ways could signpost young people to different information.



The report concludes that the proposed resources offer an exciting opportunity for young people to view and consider content infrequently shown within the media mainstream, for example talk and other forms of communication around sexual needs and wants

Wider factors that may require work far beyond the proposed film resources include ensuring the delivery of RSHP curriculum as intended, normalising the discourse around sexual consent at a macro level, and tackling retrograde gender stereotypes.

"If someone asks you, then don't feel pressured to say yes, you do have your own opinion, and you don't need to worry about what it makes them feel because it's your body like, you decide what to do with it." (Young woman, heterosexual)



Introduction

The intention behind this research and the research questions

In July 2019, NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, on behalf of a partnership with NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Lothian, commissioned University of Edinburgh to carry out in-depth, qualitative research with around 60 young people aged 16-19 years, on their understandings and experiences of communicating sexual consent. Public and policy discourse around sexual consent is growing, with progress made in relation to communicating key points of information, as described briefly below. However, the NHS Boards have identified the absence of relatable, relevant resources that help young people to practise mutual consent in a way that feels replicable in their own lives. This research, including young people from different communities of experience and identity, is intended to inform the development of such a resource, most probably a film clip or series of clips openly accessible via social media.

Discussion between the project leads within NHS and the researchers has clarified that further information messaging is not felt to be required, given the recent development of new relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) resources; what is needed is reinforcement or modelling of consent practices that will support healthy relationships (when communication is going well and everyone is feeling good). These practices are felt to be hitherto less well-defined as much of the media focus (#MeToo) and current messaging ('Tea and consent' being a key example¹) relates to the more basic information message that affirmative consent is needed. The film(s) are intended to build on or assume the delivery of new Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) curriculum material, which addresses consent cumulatively, and in ways that are appropriate to each level, from early level to senior phase.

The key research question is as follows, with a range of subsidiary research questions in two main categories: personal experiences of and views on how sexual consent is communicated, in particular when this goes well; and views on the sort of film(s) that could be produced to influence or support positive practices with regard to sexual consent, with very practical questions related to factors such as time, form and sharing.

- What are the barriers and motivators for young people in relation to communicating and recognising enthusiastic mutual consent in sexual situations?

The context of this research

The concept of 'enthusiastic consent' may be seen to emerge in literature in advance of #MeToo, although academic work on young people's understandings of consent generally and enthusiastic consent specifically is limited (for examples, see Burkett and Hamilton²; Jozkowski et al³; Shumlich

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZwvrxVavnQ>

² Burkett, M., and Hamilton, K. (2012). "Postfeminist sexual agency: Young women's negotiations of sexual consent." *Sexualities*, 15(7)



and Fisher⁴). In 2013 Coy et al found that young people lack a coherent understanding of consent and advocate for a move in sex and relationships education towards an ethic of pleasure rather than one of fear (of STIs, of pregnancy).⁵ The authors advocate a “fundamental shift ...for consent to be framed – and recognised – not as an absence of resistance, but as an enthusiastic and embodied yes”.⁶

#MeToo has subsequently elevated the concept of sexual consent in media, social media and public discourse. Internationally this has led to the development of sexual consent contracts and apps, university campus campaigns, consent staff/guardians, bystander approaches, as well as the introduction of affirmative consent laws (consent needs to be explicit not implied) for example in Sweden, Spain and several US states.⁷ High profile rape cases have also been significant drivers of change.

Sexual health refers to physical, social and emotional wellbeing in respect of a person's sexual behaviour⁸; and healthy, respectful, consensual and safe relationships or experiences are clearly critical to this. The average age of first sexual intercourse in Scotland is 16 with a significant minority of young people beginning to have sex at 13 or 14, although the percentage of girls having sex by 15 years appears to have decreased between 2010 and 2014.⁹ Previous youth consultation instigated by NHS GG&C (unpublished) indicates that young people may have ambivalent expectations and feel peer pressure to get past their sexual initiation, as well as indicating little talk amongst sexual partners about the sex or how they were feeling about it. Confusion over the role of alcohol and over sex in relationships and whether the relationship implies consent were also identified themes, as were gendered norms.

This suggests that in the grey area between an enthusiastic 'yes' and a 'no', younger and inexperienced young people particularly may feel unable to express their wishes, and as such be vulnerable to experiences that they come to see as harmful to their wellbeing. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children surveys in Scotland (HBSC) indicate that girls in particular may experience regret in relation to their first experience of sex.⁹ Positively, research evidence suggests that where children

³ Jozkowski, K., Marcantonio, T. and Hunt, M (2017) “College Students’ Sexual Consent Communication And Perceptions of Sexual Double Standards: A Qualitative Investigation” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 49(4)

⁴ Shumlich, E. and Fisher, W. (2018) “Affirmative sexual consent? Direct and unambiguous consent is rarely included in discussions of recent sexual interactions.” *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 27(3)

⁵ Coy, M., Kelly, L., Vera-Gray, F., Garner, M and Kanyeredzi, A (2013) “‘Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape’: How young people in England understand sexual consent” *Office of the Children’s Commissioner*

⁶ Coy, M., Kelly, L., Vera-Gray, F., Garner, M and Kanyeredzi, A (2016) “From ‘no means no’ to ‘an enthusiastic yes’: Changing the Discourse on Sexual Consent Through Sex and Relationships Education” in eds. Sundaram, V. and Sauntson, H. (2016) *Global Perspectives and Key Debates in Sex and Relationships Education: Addressing Issues of Gender, Sexuality, Plurality and Power*, Palgrave Pivot, London.

⁷ UK law already requires sexual consent.

⁸ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/713804635?journalCode=tchs20>

⁹ http://www.cahru.org/content/03-publications/03-briefing-papers-and-factsheets/bp21_final.pdf



and young people learn about relationships, sexuality and sexual health, they are more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity and have improved outcomes.¹⁰

A number of Scottish policies form a background to this piece of work. Key policy documents intending to support young people's positive sexual health include the Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Framework (2015-20), of which outcome four is:

“Everyone in Scotland is able to exercise their right to fulfilling relationships free from coercion and harm”¹¹

Key Messages for Young People on Healthy Relationships and Consent (2019)¹² provides professionals working with young people from secondary age to young adult with consistent information messages around consent. Specifically, it communicates a normative position on healthy relationships, covers intimate images and consent and consent and the law, and extends across young people's on and off-line experiences. Discussion within the key messages document notes issues of gender-based harassment and violence as a function of gender inequality (the vast majority of sexual violence is perpetrated by men predominantly against women and girls). The key messages on consent include the following:

“Consensual sexual activity means feeling safe and happy.”

“You need consent every time you engage in sexual activity whether you are with someone you have just met, or in a relationship.”

“Consent is freely given, not as a result of pestering, wearing someone down or making someone feel like they ‘owe’ something. Never try to persuade, pressure or encourage someone into doing things they do not want to do.”

“If the person you're with doesn't consent, or changes their mind, you might feel disappointment, but you do not have the right to make them feel bad or try to persuade them to do something they don't want to.”

“Consent can be expressed verbally or non-verbally (known as body language). It's important that you both continue to pay attention to each other and ensure you are still happy, comfortable and enjoying the sexual activity you're having. If you are not sure the other person is happy and comfortable, you do not have consent.” (p14)

Scottish Government's recent review of Personal and Social Education in schools¹³, encompassed investigation of how sexual consent is taught, with the teaching of sexual consent in primary schools

¹⁰ <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources/evidence/sre-evidence>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/sexual-health-blood-borne-virus-framework-2015-2020-update/>

¹² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/key-messages-young-people-healthy-relationships-consent-resource-professionals-working-young-people/>

¹³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/schools-personal-and-social-education-review/>



identified particularly as an area for improvement. Consent was raised within all of the engagement sessions conducted in support of this review. Relevant actions proposed include updating the guidance for teachers, Conduct of Relationships Sexual Health and Parenthood Education in Schools (2014) to include guidance on consent education; and resources to address sexual harassment in schools.

Finally, new Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) curriculum resources¹⁴ form part of Curriculum for Excellence, covering themes such as bodily autonomy, privacy, protection from abuse/safeguarding, and skills and confidence to say 'yes' and 'no', from an early age. Specific input on sexual consent, abusive and unhealthy relationships and intimate images is introduced at an appropriate age. During this consultation the researchers have reflected that delivery of these new resources is at an early stage, meaning that young people currently in the 16-19 years age group would not have benefitted from the full range of these.

This research seeks to uncover young people's understandings of consent within this changing discourse, and to explore how, in a practical way, a conceptual move towards affirmative or enthusiastic consent may be supported by the three NHS Boards.

Methods

Approach: What we did and why

This research is qualitative in nature and therefore aiming towards a depth of understanding of patterns of thought and behaviour, in complex, social situations. The research design was intended to maximise opportunities to refine and further check out emergent findings, within short-timescale work, and also to build communication, making young people feel as comfortable as possible in discussing a sensitive and personal area. There were three main elements:

- Co-production: The research tools were co-produced and piloted with a small group of young advisors, with whom the lead researcher had an existing relationship. This was intended to ensure the relevance of questioning and language and also to ensure that the lines of questioning were as sensitive as possible (e.g. looking at what questions could be done in groups and individual interviews)
- Focus groups: Focus groups were conducted with natural or established groups of young people in supportive settings. Questioning related to views on consent in general and expectations or feelings with regard to films promoting sexual health messages. As part of these, the groups were asked to comment on three existing clips about consent.¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://rshp.scot/>

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5beknvcLEco>, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4110588/video/180020387>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GSHaunKoms>



- Individual interviews: After having taken part in the focus group and having therefore developed some communication with the researcher(s), young people were invited to participate in an individual interview exploring in more depth their personal experiences of communicating sexual consent.

In practice there was some fluidity between the focus groups and interviews, as some of the young people preferred to be interviewed as a pair with a trusted friend. In some of the smaller focus groups, young people were more confident to discuss their personal experiences within the group. The focus groups were recorded through participative activities and on flipchart, with individual or small group interviews being audio-recorded with young people's permission. Thematic recording sheets were produced for both groups and individual interviews, with detailed notes and observations being recorded and matched to the themes of most interest. Individual interviews were partially transcribed. Focus group and interview schedules are provided as Appendix 1.

During co-production of the research materials, it became evident to the researchers that separating sexual consent into 'giving' and 'receiving' did not provide an appropriate conceptual framework for the lived experience of sexual communication, which may be complex (taking a number of forms), ongoing (it may be revoked and will be needed at each stage/act) and mutual (moving in both directions). The researchers reframed the question in terms of how we know when communication is going well and everyone is feeling good. Piloting, with the young advisors, also led to the interview schedules being condensed with the approval and comment of NHS leads.

The research used a voluntary or opportunity sample, although particular communities of identity or experience were targeted through dedicated groups and organisations. This research called for representation across differentiated population groups, in particular related to sexuality and gender. Young people were contacted through partner organisations of the NHS Boards, aiming for reasonable balance between the three geographic areas. They were asked to fill out a paper, demographic form, ensuring that the sample could be adequately described and any particular limitations highlighted. These were also used to gather some basic information about consent education and social media use.

Young people were given a £15 voucher in appreciation of their time.

Findings are presented in this report with the aid of quotation and short vignettes, intended to bring to life experiences discussed during fieldwork.

Overview of fieldwork, respondents and contributing organisations

Fieldwork took place across eleven focus groups in addition to the young advisors with whom the researchers piloted the fieldwork materials. All groups took place in third sector organisations or local authority youth groups who were recommended by NHS leads across the three NHS Health Board areas.



The same number of organisations were contacted in each Health Board area and all organisations which responded were contacted to arrange a focus group. The geographic profile of the sessions was as follows:

- Greater Glasgow and Clyde: 2 sessions = 10 young people
- Lothians: 6 sessions = 28 young people
- Lanarkshire: 3 sessions = 20 young people

An overview of the fieldwork and sample is provided below. The young people were invited to self-define their gender and sexual identity and sexuality, using an open question.

Fig.1 Fieldwork by session type

Session type	No. of sessions
Co-production/pilot	2
Group	11
Individual interview	30

Fig.2 Gender

Gender	Number of young people
Female	29
Male	26
Non-Binary	3
Trans (note, all young people who identified as trans also identified as male and are included in the figure above)	3

Fig.3 Sexuality

Sexuality	Number of young people	Breakdown by gender
Heterosexual	30	Female (18) Male (12)
Gay	8	Male
Lesbian	4	Female
Bisexual	7	Female (4) Male (3)
Queer	3	Female (1) Non-binary (2)
Pansexual	1	Non-binary
Asexual	1	Female
Polypanromantic asexual	1	Male
Unsure	3	Female (1) Male (2)



Ethical considerations

This research topic is sensitive and the researchers were aware of the need for balance between treating young people respectfully as young adults, and also being aware of their duty of care within the research process. Standard ethical practices were followed:

- A plain-English participant information sheet was prepared and sent to partner organisations to share with participants in advance of taking part.
- On meeting young people, the researcher(s) explained and provided an opportunity for questions about the consent form, and requested young people's informed, written consent to take part.
- The principle of confidentiality was explained to young people. Where young people gave permission to be audio-recorded, the data were anonymised with identifying features removed for the purposes of reporting.
- Data were processed and stored in accordance with data protection law and University policy and guidance.

The lead researcher conducting most of the fieldwork is community education trained and highly experienced in providing personal support. Young people were contacted via organisations who were already providing them with support, and fieldwork took place on the premises of those organisations. Prior to each meeting, the researcher(s) had a conversation with the key worker in each organisation regarding expectations for safeguarding and support. At the outset of interview, the researcher(s) set out the limitations of confidentiality within that setting. The key worker was available during and after each meeting in the event that follow-up support or debriefing was required.

Although a minority of young participants disclosed previous experiences of sexual assault or child sexual abuse within interview, these disclosures did not present current, safeguarding issues. Where this did occur the researcher paused the interview to check that the young person was ok to continue and provided options of places where they could go to speak further about what had happened. However, on the two occasions that this happened the young people felt that they had dealt with the issue and stated that it did not cause them undue distress to talk about it.

The researchers have undertaken to send an email summary of findings to supporting organisations encouraging them to share these with young people. At the time of writing, ethical approval is being sought retrospectively through University ethics process, so that findings may be shared through academic writing if this is felt to be desirable.



Challenges of methods, limitations, numbers and difficult groups to access (sample size)

The aim of this research is primarily a pragmatic one, to inform the development of sexual health resources. The research was limited by the tight timeline and, as with any piece of work, by the resources available, specifically in the ways discussed below.

Sample size

The researchers aimed to speak to 60 young people at nine focus groups, meaning that each group needed to include between six and eight young people. Staff within each supporting organisation knew that these were the numbers required, but unfortunately numbers can rarely be guaranteed in youth work settings. Two groups were cancelled because of a lack of numbers - these groups were rearranged - and numbers in the groups that did go ahead were often lower than hoped.

The researchers have spoken with 58 young people which included two additional, focus groups.

Learning disabilities

The research brief required that the sample include young people across different genders, sexualities, and across the three geographies, and young people with mild to moderate learning difficulties. It was acknowledged at the inception meeting that young people with learning disabilities were likely to be the most difficult group to engage in the research.

Both NHS leads and the lead researcher contacted organisations working with young people with learning disabilities to invite them to take part in the research. In response, two problems were expressed; firstly that staff perceived that young people with learning disabilities were not likely to be sexually active between the ages 16 and 19, and secondly that this group would find it difficult to engage with the research process. Researchers explored the possibility of adapting the research materials, but it was judged, in conversation with NHS leads, that this was not possible within the timescale or resources of the project.

The research is therefore limited in its engagement with young people with mild to moderate learning difficulties. Within the ten groups that took part in the research, 11 young people self-identified as having one or more disabilities including autism (6) ADHD (1) dyslexia (1) epilepsy (1) anxiety and depression (1) and physical disabilities (1). While these young people participated fully in group discussions and individual interviews, it seems likely that there are other young people who would not have felt able to access the research process.



Findings

Young people's knowledge and understandings of consent and what influences these

"Consent's sort of an all-round thing, isn't it? It isn't for one person and not somebody else. But the reactions are different [gendered]." (Young woman, bisexual)

"It's never really been brought up in conversation to be honest." (Young man, gay)

Focus groups began by asking young people, 'What comes to mind when you hear the word 'consent'?'. Clearly all of the groups knew in advance the topic of the focus group, however it was notable that young people were readily able to come up with words showing that consent is both recognised and associated with sexual relationships. This was true of the groups where young people struggled to answer some of the later questions, although there were clear differences between the groups in the sophistication of the responses. The word cloud below illustrates some of the young people's word associations.

Fig.4: Consent word cloud



Young people felt their views in general on consent were shaped by news, media and film, porn and social norms. A minority of young people mentioned #MeToo and other social media campaigns. The cup of tea film clip was remembered by many young people and participants remembered talking about it with their peers (in particular, 'don't make them drink the tea' – the pouring of the tea down the throat of the character).

However, more young people were able to identify media tropes that had influenced how they think about consent generally and, in particular, about gender norms related to sex and consent. One group talked about how 'James Bond always gets the girl' and suggested the message here is that if men are charming and persistent, then women will always comply. In a different group young people discussed how computer games similarly can normalise particular sorts of sexualised behaviour. For example, in Grand Theft Auto players can take the role of a man going to a strip club or exchanging payment for sex and young women thought that this could make young men think it is ok to 'just drive over and pick a lassie up'.

Social media and learning how to negotiate social media featured highly in young people's lists of the things that influence the ways they think about consent. Many young people talked about feeling pressure to present themselves in particular, often gendered and/or sexualised, ways online. Young people in multiple groups (mostly, but not exclusively, young women) described experiences of being approached online by, often much older, men asking for nude photos or sexual contact. Sending nudes and sexting were not topics that came up often in the focus groups, but when they were discussed there was a sense from young people that they perceive pressure to send and receive unexpected nude pictures as a normal part of sexual relationships.

Young people also felt that their views about consent had been influenced by their upbringing including, particularly, their parents' attitude to sex and to talking about sex. Many young people expressed the opinion that young people who had been given negative messages about sex at home or had not been able to talk about sex at home would find it more difficult to communicate about sex in other contexts, including with a sexual partner.

For the most part, consent was not felt to be a significant topic of conversation amongst young people. Reflecting comments from many young people, one young woman said that consent was 'common sense' and she would be more likely to discuss the absence of consent; '[if] there's someone trying to get with us and we don't want to'.

Most young people said that they would talk to trusted, close friends about sex. Often the discussion would sit at a more general level of 'gossip', either about what they or others have done and with whom rather than going into detail, although some young people said that they would talk to friends about pleasure, likes and dislikes. One young woman described, 'keeping it between me and him', although her friend likes to talk about the details. Several heterosexual young men described how their communication about sex with their peers consisted mostly discussing 'who we want to fuck' which they quickly qualified by saying, 'but if any of them came near us we'd run away'. There were of course differences between the young people in relation to how reserved they are, how much they enjoy gossiping about their sexual experiences (in some cases their fun and enjoyment was felt very clearly within the groups), and how trustworthy their social group is felt to be.

The young people within our sample were in general highly critical of the sex education they had received in school, feeling that teachers were embarrassed or uncomfortable. Many did not recall having received any consent education at all and in some cases (largely denominational schools) felt they had received no sex education. In some cases young people were left puzzled by what they had



received, were unable to recall anything about it or felt that there were significant gaps. In particular, where young people remembered receiving sex education, they repeatedly commented that it had been completely heteronormative.

"We got told in biology how a sperm travels to an egg and that was that." (young man, gay)

"Google taught me more about sex than school ever did" (group discussion: Bellshill)

"The consent we got taught in school was like that tea video, it's very yes/no, black/white, whilst it's not like that in real life." (Young woman, bisexual)

The language of 'sex positive', 'yes means yes' and 'enthusiastic sexual consent' was generally not recognised or particularly meaningful for young people; with 'sex positive' being the most recognised of the three. The pilot group of young people did not like the term 'enthusiastic' as they felt it sounds 'excitable and too keen'. Young people from several groups guessed that 'sex positive' was connected to being HIV positive. As such, we suggest using language, such as 'are you ok with this?' or 'are you making sure that everyone's having a good time?'

What consent looks like when it goes well

"[good communication is] both talking and both telling each other what they want and how they feel about it" (Young man, gay)

This conversation was introduced by asking young people how, if they saw a couple having sexual contact on TV, they would recognise that the experience was consensual and/or that sexual communication was going well.

Most young people's first answer to this question was that neither of the people looked uncomfortable. When pressed to describe the signs that both people were comfortable, young people often used descriptions relative to a lack of comfort such as "neither of them is pulling away" or "neither of them looks like they don't want to be there or they are under pressure to be there". One group referred to freezing up, saying no, avoiding eye contact and pushing away. This same group discussed how sexual arousal does not necessarily mean sexual consent.

When the researcher moved the conversation to positive signs of consent, young people described both body language and verbal cues that related to mutuality, pleasure and respect.

- They are both equally taking part
- They both look like they are having fun
- Their facial expressions suggest that they feel good
- You can hear from the noises
- They are checking in with each other and asking questions like 'is this ok?', 'does this feel good?'
- No-one is under pressure so they would feel able to speak up



However, one group, that included several young people who identified as autistic, felt it important to emphasise that positive experiences of consent may look different for different partnerships and that it is, therefore, important for each partnership to work out what consent means for them and make it a natural and ongoing part of the relationship, 'just like checking what someone wants for dinner'.

Practising consent

Normalising the conversation

A clear theme emerging from this research is the need for more talking about sexual consent, both within sexual situations and socially, including between young people and trusted adults. Young people repeatedly said that one of the key things that would make it easier for them to talk about consent with a partner or prospective partner was feeling more comfortable talking about sex and consent generally. 'Making consent something normal to talk about' was raised as an important factor both within sexual encounters and also in the wider social context.

Trust was an important aspect of normalising conversations about sex and consent. Several young people talked about how they found it easier to talk about consent because their parents talked openly about sex. Others described how trusted adults in community settings had provided opportunities for them to talk more openly about sex. One young woman described how supporting other young people in a youth work context had made her feel more used to talking about sex ('that made it better and a lot easier'). Where young people talked openly with close friends about sex, several described using these trusted peer relationships to 'sound out' their expectations of how sexual partners should behave and to compare experiences. Many of the key messages from young people (described later in this report) highlight the importance of talking.

Vignette: Three heterosexual young women said that they did not talk about sex with their friends, even when aware that their friends were having sex. At school, staff had 'tried to' give sex education, but from the young people's point of view this failed. Although they were able to associate words with 'consent', they had not heard of 'enthusiastic consent', 'yes means yes' or 'sex positive'. They could identify the messages of the sample films however would not watch any of them, and they found many of the interview questions embarrassing and difficult to answer. When interviewed individually one of the young women said she thought people should ask before initiating sex, but that in her peer group (at the younger end of our age range), sex often 'just happens'.

Working counter to a culture of openness, young people were also aware that sex may be a taboo subject and aware of when adults such as parents and teachers are uncomfortable around it. In two different groups young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities talked about their specific cultural context, describing a simultaneous taboo about talking about sex and pressure to fit into traditional gender roles. The influence of a lack of sex education and negative messages about sex at denominational schools was raised repeatedly by many young people.

Verbal and non-verbal communication and communication preferences

"Most people use their body language rather than saying it." Young woman (heterosexual)



“If people are looking comfortable doing it, cos if you’re in a situation you probably won’t care what’s going on like if you’re comfortable with it, like that’s when you know it’s good and that... that’s when actions are speaking more than words ‘cos they’re not panicky and that they’re a lot more at ease” (Young man, gay)

Young people were asked to give percentages relative to how much of sexual consent they think is verbal or non-verbal. Young people were frequently able to identify what sexual consent or withdrawal of consent might look like in body language, however the percentages they gave varied widely. A number pointed out that body language can be misinterpreted, especially with someone you do not know well. The optimal scenario, discussed in ‘what consent looks like when it goes well’, above, appears to encompass being in tune with and responding to changes in body language and also verbal checks both before and during sex. Many young people suggested that verbal checks became particularly important if there were any uncertainty about non-verbal communication.

“See the video like the two guys, that’s obviously like showing that if somebody leans in for something and the other person pulls away that’s obviously not consenting to it. But if the other person leans in they’re kind of consenting in a way ‘cos they both went for it. So I think that’s quite a lot of it, just going in for things and seeing what the person’s reaction is to it. But I think it should be more verbal ‘cos if one of them was to interpret that as they went in for it and I didn’t want them to, there’s no words there to prove otherwise.” (Young woman, bisexual)

One young woman described how previously she had little experience of men asking questions during sex, however her present boyfriend does this in a way that feels ‘natural’ and she described this positively. Some young people seemed far more aware than others of their own communication needs. One group which included autistic young people felt that for some relationships, it is useful to have a checklist including ‘to have conversation about what is ok and what is not ok’. One autistic young person talked about the importance of learning other individuals’ preferences for communication and for touch. With their girlfriend, they have talked not only about their preferences but also about how they will communicate (‘What will you do to tell me that you’re not comfortable? What do I do to tell you I’m not comfortable?’), developing mutually understood signals such as a squeeze of the hand, to mean I want to let go of your hand. This couple conducted repeated, verbal checks at every stage of their relationship and sexual experiences.

A small number of young people, both male and female, reflected the idea that men are not supposed to ask for consent. One group of young heterosexual men stated very clearly that ‘girls don’t like it if you ask them before you kiss them’ and lamented that ‘girls always expect young men to make the first move but get angry if you get it wrong’. This view was not, however, reflected in the opinions of young women. Young people from several groups discussed how sexual consent is rarely discussed verbally in TV and film. One young man laughed about “the look” where suddenly both parties understand that they are going to have sex, the implication being that if they have had ‘the look’ then the sex is sure to be consensual. There may be a feeling that talking about consent ‘kills the vibe’ which contributes to young people’s reticence.



"I think when it's the start of a relationship, when you don't know how serious it is yet, you are scared of scaring them off. Or being, I don't know, I don't know, being that person that, that's like, 'oh we need to talk about this', no-one wants to be that person who kind of kills the fun!" (non-binary young person, queer)

"I like it when people say, do you want me to do this? Do you not want me to do this?" (young woman, heterosexual)

Young people gave examples of communicating before, during and less frequently, after a sexual encounter. One felt it was less embarrassing in the moment because 'it just has to be done'. Texts, 'phone or social media might be used when young people are checking out whether the other person feels the same way, so before a sexual relationship or encounter. This was mentioned by many young people as a more comfortable way of communicating, prior to sexual contact, because it is easier to end the communication and you do not confront the other person's reaction or body language.

"I think for other people because it's not face-to-face and they're not really going to see a reaction that they don't want to see." (Young woman, heterosexual)

"It's easier to ask by text because it's less shameful if they turn you down" (young man, heterosexual)

Young people's views varied about for which acts sexual consent is most important. Many felt it was a general principle applying across the board and felt uncomfortable identifying specific situations in which consent is more important because even 'small' violations can be harmful. However some identified particular acts or issues where verbal communication might be more important, for example, protection, penetration or acts requiring preparation such as anal sex. A minority of young people gave the nuanced view that verbal checking may be important when things change, so if a change in body language is noted, or with each new act. In this understanding the act itself may be less important than where it occurs within a pattern of experience.

"If they were maybe relaxed before and they've went a bit tense maybe ask them if they're alright, if they still kind of want to, because you've noticed that change in the person." (Young woman, lesbian)

Summary of barriers and enablers

"Even if you've done something before and they've done something before, with each other it's different because everybody's like different in what they like and stuff" (Young woman, bisexual)

"That's (BDSM) what got me to think about it more, which is really strange you would think harder stuff would like, would be a wee bit niche or that..." (young man, gay)



Fig.5 below shows the barriers and facilitators of communicating mutual consent emerging from conversations with young people, divided into strong, recurrent themes and those arising less frequently or with lesser emphasis.

With exceptions, most young people felt that it was not easy to talk about sexual consent with a partner, feeling that it could be awkward, embarrassing or that there may be a fear of having read the situation wrongly. Some young people agreed that it was necessary, if not always easy. Young people often connected this awkwardness with a more general sense that sex is a taboo subject, as discussed above, and so they identified settings where talking about sex is discouraged as a barrier. Several groups identified that the connection of 'consent' with 'rape' can make it a difficult subject to introduce because, particularly in a 'hook-up' or 'one night stand' there is an anxiety that in a heterosexual encounter, if a woman asks about consent the man might think she is making an accusation.

Some young people perceived themselves to have a direct style of communication in general, and this seemed to make them feel more confident in communicating in sexual situations. Some said that they had hardened their resolve to communicate their own needs after having had negative experiences in the past.

Vignette: One heterosexual, young woman told the researcher, "I used to find it hard to say no". She told a story about a boy she used to talk to who was begging for half an hour, and she was being 'nice' about it, and in the end she 'gave in'. When she left she realised 'how wrong that actually was'. She told him, 'don't you dare' do that to me again.

"I don't think it's awkward because I'm just quite a straightforward person, I just say it how it is, but I think a lot of people probably wouldn't want to talk about it." (Young woman, bisexual)

Age and sexual experience emerged in most of the groups as key factors enabling young people to communicate with more confidence, suggesting that younger and/or less sexually experienced young people may be most in need of support around sexual consent. One young woman aged 16 said of her younger friends, 'they wouldnae know how to say no'.

The other, most common theme was being in a relationship/knowing the person well versus a one-night stand/not knowing the person. Often young people felt more able to communicate when they knew someone well and understood their likes and dislikes, however there were conflicting messages here. While communication may be easier as you come to know someone, sex can be felt to be expected when in a relationship.

"I think if I felt close and confident with the person I could do it" (Young man, heterosexual)

In a one-night stand, most young people suggested that it might be more awkward because you don't know the other person, but some also stated that there is less emotional investment and the priority is having the sexual encounter that you want. One gay young man suggested that communicating personal preferences and limits is important in a one-off sexual encounter because of the lack of



personal relationship and history. He suggested that this was particularly important in kink and BDSM communities where there are specific physical risks. Therefore, navigating a one-night stand may demand from the young person more confidence in communicating verbally. However, conversely, some young people said they would be more inclined to let things go as there is less investment in working on good sex together.

“From like my personal experience, I’d say when you trust the person more, and you’ve known them for a longer time, it makes it easier to talk about it, than with someone that you’ve known for a short time, ‘cos you don’t really. With a person that you’ve known for ages you know like how they are and how they’re going to react to stuff like that but see when you’ve not known the person that like you’d be feart of like what they’re going to say and if they’re going to tell people or something.” (young woman, bisexual)

“It’s just the like comfort factor, you know them so I think that fear that they could go back to someone and be like blah, blah, blah that’s sort of like gone in your head ‘cos you know them” (young man, gay)

“I feel that like in one night stands sometimes it can go really well and that because people do know what they’re wanting and that, ‘cos on a one night stand they’re not really wanting to mess about” (young man, gay)

“If you know it’s only going to happen once, you’re a bit less worried about how like good or bad it is.” (young woman, gay)

The dynamic or trust between the sexual partners was often also highlighted as an important factor in talking together. This wasn’t necessarily related to the length of the relationship or how well the two people knew each other. A group of heterosexual young women for example said it would be easier to talk to a sexual partner who responded in a mature way, not ‘laughing at things you are embarrassed to say’ or ‘acting immature’. Other young people said that they would like to have more examples of how it is possible to talk about consent during sex without it being awkward or ‘breaking the vibe’.

Gender stereotypes may inhibit communication and within this research were more apparent within heterosexual relationships. Most of the groups talked about gendered double standards around sex where women who talk about sex are considered ‘sluts’ while men who do not demonstrate stereotypical machismo are called ‘pussies’. Young heterosexual women talked about feeling unsafe to talk about consent both physically – “I don’t know how he would react and he would probably be bigger than me” - and socially – “I’d be scared he’d go and laugh about me with his pals”. Feeling physically unsafe and a fear of a physical reaction to communicating about consent was also expressed by a young gay man who had tended to have sexual experiences with older men.

“I feel that boys can be more direct whereas if a female was to be direct it’d be like, who are you?” (Young woman, gay)



“Girls are, they seem more vulnerable, and if they talk about what they want they could get laughed at or stuff like that.” (Young woman, heterosexual)

Traditional masculinities, and male perceptions of what young women want from a man, were also observed to be present in inhibiting talk about sex. A young, heterosexual man in our sample said that he found it easier to talk to his female friends about sex and that there was a social pressure for men to say that their sexual experiences are ‘great’ even when they are not.

One group of heterosexual young men described perceiving double standards from a male perspective. They felt that women want them to ‘judge the vibe’ rather than ask for consent, but then get angry when men read the situation wrongly. Their view of consent was quite basic; more about asking a girl if she was ‘into them’. They felt that girls expected them to be ‘powerful’ and in control of the situation and therefore not to ask, unless they sense that she is uncomfortable.

The perception from young men that young women don’t want them to ask about consent was also expressed by a second group of heterosexual young men who thought that they might come across as ‘creepy’ if they talked about consent. However, there was a potential tension between not being ‘creepy’ by talking about consent and not being seen as ‘a beast’ who acts without getting consent. While these young men showed a clear value position – they agreed that consent is needed for sexual activity and that you should ‘just leave’ if the woman refuses consent – they appeared to be talking about consent to have sex rather than a more ongoing conversation about the kind of sex that is being had, and how partners are responding to that. One young man was an exception to this, however he appeared to be more verbally communicative in general. Unsurprisingly, concerns over facing allegations, and the potential repercussions of this, appeared to be more alive in the minds of young, heterosexual males.

Fig.5 Overview of barriers/enablers for young people in communicating mutual consent in sexual situations

	Barriers	Facilitators
Strong themes	Being young and/or sexually inexperienced	Being older and/or more sexually experienced
	Not knowing the person	Knowing your partner, building communication and trust
		Some young people found it easier to communicate in a one-off situation, as it is important to get to the point, there is less emotional content and you do not have to face the person again



	Fear of the other person's negative response, e.g. laughter, rejection (both ways), being named a 'prude' or a 'tease',	The other person asking for consent or accepting redirection/refusal in a neutral/respectful way, providing a way out/options
	Embarrassment about talking about sex. For many young people this links to an experience of growing up in contexts where talking about sex and/or sex itself is taboo.	Being more accustomed to talking about sex. This might either be because of upbringing/education where talking about sex is normalised, or young people generally being assertive, or making a conscious decision to be assertive based on their values/politics or previous negative experiences
	Worry that information will be passed to their peers or their partner's peers. Fear of social judgement (young women: slut, virgin, young men: pussy)	Having a peer group with whom they can talk honestly about their sexual experiences, discuss preferences and challenge each other when necessary
	Gender stereotypes/identities	Using text and social media to communicate so that things can be said that might be too awkward to communicate face-to-face.
Occasional themes	Young people not knowing what they want and, therefore, being more likely to 'go along' with something that they are not sure about/feel ambivalent about.	Being self-aware – young people who are aware of their own wants/preferences and perhaps preferred way of communicating
	Pressure from a partner	
	Media representation with no awkward talking, trope of the persistent, in control male	

Experiences of saying and responding to 'no'

"If someone asks you, then don't feel pressured to say yes, you do have your own opinion, and you don't need to worry about what it makes them feel because it's your body like, you decide what to do with it." (Young woman, heterosexual)



"I don't care if it hurts their feelings 'cos they'd hurt my feelings if they went any further."
(Young woman, heterosexual)

Many young people agreed that it can be difficult to say 'no' to something sexually, largely due to concerns over the feelings or response of their sexual partner ('you get a gut feeling it's like upset them or something'). This fell broadly into two categories: worrying about being laughed at or having information about you passed to others; and worry over rejecting the person and hurting their feelings, or over their partner not having their needs met.

"If they're watching you and waiting for an answer it's like pressurising you." (Young woman, heterosexual)

"I think it would be difficult to be like, no I don't want to do that actually, I just want to do this, because you know I want them to have a good time." (Young man, gay)

"Some people could see it as a rejection or like, some men could take it – I keep saying men but primarily it is men – that sort of feel entitled to like women, it's normally women." (Young woman, bisexual)

One young woman described how she and her boyfriend had explicitly discussed consent before having sex, and that if she did not want to do something sexually she would tell him. However, 'as an enjoyable thing, I wouldn't be like, I didn't quite enjoy that' because it would feel awkward for him. Other young women (both gay and heterosexual) described situations where they did not particularly enjoy a certain act but did not have strong negative feelings and said that they would probably still do it, either because they did not want to upset their partner or because they felt that they would get something back in return (either sexually or in their day-to-day life). This suggests a kind of trade-off within relationships where pleasure becomes secondary to other factors.

The researchers had a number of interesting discussions with young people about how a sexual partner can respond in a way that encourages honesty and openness. The person could:

- Give you time
- Give reassurance that if you change your mind it is ok and you can do something else instead
- Ask questions, 'are you ok?' 'is this alright?', providing the space to speak up
- Approach talking about consent, sexual preferences and pleasure as something that is a normal part of sex rather than an awkward conversation that has to be had

"They make sure that you want to and they ask you like, even during the middle of it, like are you still alright with this? I think that makes it a lot better, 'cos then they're getting that reassurance that you definitely want to go through with it, so it makes them like feel better in themselves." (young woman, lesbian)



Peer influences

Peer groups were felt to be an influence or presence in many of the researchers' conversations with young people about sexual consent. As described above, there is a gendered aspect to how social relationships frame experiences of sexual consent, which relates to fear of social judgment. Young people often referred to their fears of peer groups being told negative things about them, based on decisions about sex. For young women these judgements related to either having sex or not having sex ('slut', 'virgin') whereas for young men they solely related to not having sex ('pussy', 'virgin Mary'). It was felt that young men would be teased relentlessly by their peers if they were known not to be having sex, however the pressure of this would vary depending on the individual's response, and also with age. Trust emerged as a key theme overall – in partners, peers and adults with a role in supporting young people.

Positively however, young people did mention occasions where they had 'called out' the behaviour of their peers with regard to consent, leading to progressive conversations. Some young people talked about experiences of 'educating' one another. Others felt supported by their peers and that, by talking to friends, their confidence in communicating in sexual situations had grown.

Within this research, situations were occasionally highlighted where young women in particular were not believed by their peers when stating that there had been a lack of consent in a sexual interaction. Such situations were sometimes extremely challenging for peer relationships, in addition to the wider context of the allegation.

Messages to a younger self

"It takes a lot of like courage as well I feel to talk about that sort of stuff and to be like open and know yourself so well to be able like then be like, this is what I want, this is what I like." (Young woman, heterosexual)

Young people largely agreed that it was younger, young people and young people who had less sexual experience who were most in need of further support around sexual consent, saying that both maturity and experience make positive sexual communicating easier. They had a range of messages that they would wish to give to either their younger selves or to younger young people who are embarking on their first sexual experiences. Common themes include working out what you want, being truthful (being truthful to oneself as well as to others) and waiting until you are ready.

- Just for it not to be a topic that's frowned upon
- Speak to someone you trust – a friend or adult
- Just straight up say it – don't beat around the bush
- You should discuss it a bit more
- Adults talking to young people about sex/consent
- Young girls knowing that harassment is not alright so they know it is ok to talk about sex not just to be subject to whatever their partner wants
- Work out what it is that you want so that you can communicate that to someone else



- Make sure you know what you want
- Don't feel pressured to have sex because you feel that you 'should' do it or because your friends are pressuring you. It's ok to wait.
- Tell the truth, always be truthful about what you feel
- Sex can be emotionally important, not just fun

Unexpected omissions

There were a number of themes that failed to come across in the data as strongly as the researchers expected, although they were not the focus of the research brief. The influence of alcohol and drugs was one of these. A minority of young people referred to the anxieties of some, particularly young men, around having sex at all with someone who has been drinking, for fear of facing accusations at a later stage. One young woman referred to her male friend being subject to the unwanted advances of a drunken young woman at a party. The acceptability of drunken sex was certainly being challenged by some of the young people participating, showing an awareness of how drink/drugs can complicate sexual consent.

Young people identified pornography as an influence on how young people thought about sex, but again perhaps not as frequently as might be expected. Pornography was largely felt to fuel unrealistic expectations. Atypically, one young person, who described porn films with interviews with the participants at the beginning and end, felt it had helped them to find a language for talking about sexual preferences.

Issues around consent to sex within relationships were not discussed as often as expected. Some young people referred to a feeling of entitlement to sex within relationships however this was often raised in general rather than in relation to themselves. There may be questions here about how comfortable young people are in disclosing issues of consent within their relationships, and how communication about sex relates to the qualities of the relationship overall. Sexual violence and coercive control are highly gendered. Survey data highlight that 29 per cent of women in the UK have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or previous partner from the age of 15¹⁶, suggesting that sexual consent within relationships is certainly a key issue albeit not one that has come through strongly in this research. One young person gave a vivid account of how both he and his girlfriend found it hard to disappoint one another, when not 'in the mood'. Another, non-binary young person talked about 'educating' their older boyfriend, who had missed out on some of the messages around consent in virtue of his age.

"If like the man in a relationship is the dominating party, in terms of initiating sex and stuff like that, I think sometimes they don't think about what they're doing, if they're in a comfortable relationship. And sometimes the other/their person needs to be like 'hang on ...this isn't, you

¹⁶ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>



can't just expect these things'. They're not definitely going to happen." (Non-binary young person)

Pressure to share of intimate images was mentioned in a few group discussions as something that impacts how young people think about sex and consent. 'Nag for a nude' posters in school were mentioned and one group discussed auctioning foot images online. However online sexual interactions did not feature in the discussions.

What film(s) would appeal to young people

Watching films on social media

Nearly all young people who participated in the research used social media. The most popular places for watching film content were either YouTube, Instagram or Snapchat.

The most important factor in whether young people view content on social media was very clearly whether there is a 'hook' that grabs their attention within two or three seconds, otherwise they will simply scroll past or skip. Young people suggested that the hook could be colour, music, text, humour, a celebrity or other attractive/intriguing person, or a story where they immediately want to know what happens.

Most young people said that a film clip for social media should not be longer than a minute, with some saying that they would automatically skip a film that indicated it was longer than 30 seconds. However, others suggested that if a film clip was interesting – and particularly if it had a cliff-hanger – then they could be persuaded to 'click through' to a longer film. Young people from several groups talked about social media 'mini-series' where short clips of new content that form a story are released over a period of time. These work best where young people are invested in the story and want to know what happens next.

Many young people said that they like to know what they are watching from the beginning – if it is not clear what the clip is about from the beginning then they are likely to skip it. However, others suggested that if they were intrigued and wanted to find out more then they might be inclined to keep watching. Many young people stated that they would not watch anything that was an advert or looked like it might be an advert.

Almost all young people said that they like to answer social media 'polls', especially where they are interested in the topic and they get to see how other people have answered the question. Some young people suggested that answering polls in particular ways could signpost young people to different information. There was, however, some scepticism about whether young people answer these polls honestly and, therefore, it was suggested that while polls are a good way to encourage young people to engage with a film they are not useful for gathering information about young people's opinions.

The 'cup of tea' consent film was mentioned in almost every group. Several young people talked about discussing the film with their peers and could quote lines from the film. There were other films



mentioned, but none more than once. Reasons young people gave for remembering specific films were that they were shocking or that they had resonated with their lives in some way.

Comparing three sample films

As part of group discussions, the researchers showed young people three short films about consent. Young people were asked about their first impressions of each film and then the films were used as a starting point for discussion about what sort of film they thought would work best.

Film 1:

This is a short animated film that shows potentially the sexual communication in interactions between a penis, a vulva, a breast and a hand¹⁷.

This film was the most divisive; young people tended to either love it or hate it. Many liked the shock factor of the film and the most common immediate response was laughter. However, other young people found it 'cringy' and almost all young people said that they wouldn't watch it in public. Few participants said that they would share the film on a public profile but some said that they would share it in a private chat with friends because of the humour and shock factor.

Some groups suggested that the film's message is over-simplistic and doesn't go much beyond the 'no means no' message about consent. While not all of the body parts are gendered, many young people noticed that the character wanting sexual contact was always voiced by a male sounding actor and the character indicating that they did not want sexual contact was always voiced by a female sounding actor, thus buying into existing gender stereotyped roles.

Film 2:

This is a slightly longer (circa 3 minute) live action Scandinavian film telling the story of a potential sexual interaction between two young men. One young man comes to the other's house to give him a baseball shirt, it seems from context that they have already had some online sexual contact and there is a short flirtation - the first man goes to kiss the second but pulls away when he realises that the second man is not interested. At the end of the film they are playing computer games and there is a suggestion that that the second man is feeling more comfortable and they might kiss¹⁸.

The overwhelming first reaction to this film from young people was negative. Repeated comments were that it was boring, that it was too slow and too dark and that they didn't really understand what it was about. A repeated comment was that it would be better if it had more dialogue. Even young people who did like it said that they probably would have scrolled past it if they saw it on social media because it would not have caught their attention.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5beknvcLEco>

¹⁸ <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4110588/video/180020387>



One group, and a small number of individuals across different groups, appreciated the nuanced message and thought that its focus on body language was more naturalistic than the other two films. Young people from most groups said that it was good that the film portrayed a gay relationship; unsurprisingly, this message was particularly clear from the groups based in LGBTQ+ organisations, but it was also a more general message. However, the one group made up only of young heterosexual men expressed a strong view that they would not watch the film because it featured a gay relationship.

Film 3:

This film focuses on verbal sexual communication. It starts by showing various hand-written notes and then the notes are held up in different combinations to show different words and phrases that could be used to communicate about consent, sexual preferences and pleasure. The soundtrack to the film is the Spice Girls song Wannabe¹⁹.

Overall this film was the most popular. Most young people really liked the music and that the message of the song fits the message of the film. They liked the focus on sexual communication and that the different phrases offered concrete examples of words that could be used to communicate about sex and modelled how these words and phrases could be used.

However, the beginning of the film is quite slow and, especially if young people were watching the film on silent, there would be no hook to get their attention. Through the discussions it became apparent that the music was a very strong draw and if the film is watched on silent it actually becomes quite dull. Also, since the film does not explicitly mention sex, some young people (particularly although not exclusively those who identified as neurodiverse) struggled to understand what it was about.

Considering the films overall

The first film hooked people in through the shock value of animated genitalia, but the second film was deemed to lack the necessary hook. The third film used music to good effect but this is only effective if a young person is scrolling social media with their sound on – otherwise the visuals were not deemed to be attention-grabbing. Some ways that films could grab attention is through colour, music, text or a story that immediately pulls the viewer in or intrigues them. However, different 'hooks' appeal to different young people.

Different young people are attracted to different types of films, promoting the concept of sexual consent. Some of these differences related to diversity and accessibility. For LGBTQ+ young people it is very important that films represent relationships that reflect their relationship experiences. Heterosexual young women were less concerned about seeing their own relationships reflected in the

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GSHaunKoms>



films, but heterosexual young men commented that the film with gay characters was not relevant to them, and were visibly uncomfortable while watching this film. One group of heterosexual young men expressed worries over live action films where 'shan acting', failing to connect with the actors, might turn them off.

Neurodiverse young people expressed clear needs in terms of the way that messages are presented, and many young people commented on the lack of disabled representation in the sample films used in the research. Subtitles are important – for accessibility reasons but also because young people often view social media with their mobile phones muted – but it is important not to rely upon subtitles or text as some young people find reading difficult.

Neurodiverse young people and heterosexual young men emphasised the importance of a very clear and literal message. These groups tended to find ambiguity, metaphor and nuance confusing.

Young people share social media content in different ways and in different places. Young people said they would share the first film in private group chats because of its shock value and humour but would not share it on public or semi-public forums because they would be embarrassed. Several young people said that they would share it if they were not the first person to share it. Young people who liked the second and third films were more likely to be willing to share them publicly. Many young people said that they might send any of the films to a specific person who they thought might be interested or might find it useful.

Young people's advice to the NHS regarding films

Researchers asked young people directly if they had any advice or suggestions for the NHS regarding making film clips relating to consent.

The most common issues raised in these comments are included below:

- It would be impossible to make one clip that would be relevant to everyone.
- It is very important that films do not perpetuate existing gender stereotypes. For example, young women can be the person initiating a conversation about consent and young men can talk about consent without being seen by young women as less attractive.
- Diversity exists not only in the types of relationships young people have but also in the types of films that they find accessible – multiple clips, then, might do well to represent different styles in addition to different content.
- Despite the challenges of grabbing the viewer's attention and despite the broadly negative reaction to film 2 above, young people like the idea of a live action 'story' but only if the acting is good and if they are engaged enough in the story that they want to know what will happen. Several young people suggested pulling a particularly engaging scene out of a short film to play at the beginning and draw people in.
- Several groups suggested a series of short clips that make up an Instagram or snapchat 'mini-series' to tell a story. Each clip would need to end on a cliff-hanger which could link to a poll.



- Two groups suggested real-life stories where an actor (or person who experienced the situation) tells a first-hand experience related to consent. One group suggested two people giving their own account of the same situation.
- Young people had very mixed views about humour. Many people felt it was important to include humour into the film(s) others felt that humour is individual and may put some young people off. Several young people suggested that showing how humour can be naturally used in sexual situations might be a way of introducing some levity to the film.
- All groups thought it important that any film were piloted with young people at a stage where significant changes can, if necessary, still be made. Two groups expressed frustration that on previous occasions, organisations had asked for their feedback on resources, but it had been too late to implement their suggestions.

Discussion: what this consultation means for sexual health resources promoting positive experiences of sexual consent

Some of the findings described above give cause for optimism, showing that basic information messages about sexual consent appear to be getting through to young people. Although the sample is self-selecting, young people were generally able to associate words with 'consent' when asked, and some young people were capable of giving a nuanced account of sexual consent having given the topic considerable thought. Many of the young people agreed that sexual consent was important and that younger, young people do need further messaging and support to navigate it.

This consultation suggests that film clips for young people on the subject of sexual consent need to: use hooks, cliff-hangers or story (such as a mini-series) to draw young people in quickly; work without sound; reflect different identities; show communication of sexual consent in its different forms; and could include polls or another form of interactivity such as seeing the next part of the story. It may also be important to reflect the different communication styles used by different individuals and in different relationships (covering electronic, verbal and non-verbal), the importance of young people's peer groups, and to show how to communicate and respond positively to 'no' or redirection in sexual situations. Clarity of communication is likely to be important for young people with autism and heterosexual young men.

It was notable that there were comments about all three, sample films where fairly minor changes could have made a big difference to how young people received them. The researchers believe therefore that it will be important to work with young people at all stages of the films' development.

The 'messages to my younger self' were popular and, in a meeting between NHS leads and young advisers, there was a suggestion to build on this by developing a digital 'bank' of messages that both young people and adults could read and add to. Building on the suggestions from research participants, other ideas surfacing at this meeting included using polls as teasers to draw young people into the films, and developing a series of clips with a common branding that address the same incident from different perspectives, using different styles, or showing different outcomes.



Exploration of the needs of some specific, communities of identity and experience has not been possible within this bounded piece of work. As indicated above, a key group for further work may be young people with learning difficulties, for whom there may be very specific issues and also specific challenges in engaging young people who are known to have sexual experiences; some of the barriers here may be about the surrounding adults recognising the sexuality of these young people. It has been extremely useful within this current work, to include some young people with autism and therefore to reflect particular communication needs in this respect. A further group perhaps requiring dedicated work is young people at particular risk of sexual exploitation, including looked after children and young people.

This piece of work has also raised some issues and questions that extend beyond the development of a resource on sexual consent. It is important to note the different ways that young people understand consent, particularly where young men may tend to think of consent as initial agreement to pursue a sexual relationship while young women may tend to think of consent as an ongoing process. Further work is needed to ensure that young people in school receive sexual consent education at all levels, as intended. Youth work contexts are supportive in providing opportunities for more relaxed conversations about sex and consent, and may be important for those young people who say that they would not watch an open access film clip at all. There are wider social issues such as promoting the confidence of parents in openly discussing issues of sex and consent, and to continue the process that has begun with #MeToo of normalising the discourse more generally.

Finally, issues of gender identity have been highlighted above as important contextual factors to how many young men and women may practice consent. As these are slow to change, it may be necessary to acknowledge their importance in how some young people will receive messages. Again, producing the resources alongside young people will be key. Creating content that young people do not normally see on mainstream media – such as young people communicating about sexual consent or confronting situations where sexual partners want or like different things – presents an exciting opportunity for generating discussion and reflection.



Appendix 1: Focus group/interview schedules

NHS Lanarkshire, Greater Glasgow & Clyde, Lothians

Research with 16-19-year-olds: enthusiastic consent

Fieldwork schedules

Group Discussion

Ethics: go through consent forms answering any questions and checking that everyone is willing to proceed.

Young people will not be asked directly about their personal experiences in the group discussion.

1. What came to mind when you hear the word consent?
(give out 3 post-it notes to each participant – everyone writes one word or phrase on each post-it note and puts it on flip-chart 1)

Read them all out and discuss – add any new ones. Prompt questions:

- What influences young people's views in general about consent? Do you hear much about consent?
- Have you heard the term, 'enthusiastic consent'? What do you think it means? Are young people in general aware of this term? How do you feel about the language?
- Have you heard the term, 'sex positive'? What do you think it means? Are young people in general aware of this term? How do you feel about the language?
- Have you heard the term, 'yes means yes? What do you think it means? Are young people in general aware of this term? How do you feel about the language?
-

Explain the focus of this piece of work:

- Consent within a sexual experience/relationship (not harassment from a stranger)
- What consent feels/looks like when communication is going well and it's obvious that everyone is enjoying it – positive experiences

1.1 Question 1: What helps young people to communicate around consent? (with partner/in sexual situation)

1.2 Question 2: What makes it difficult for young people to communicate around consent?

1.3 Question 3: How do you know when/ what does it look like when communication is going well? (it's consensual, people are feeling good/right)

(on flipchart 2, with 3 questions)

Remind the group that the final outcome will be a film or a short series of films (flip chart 3 with "FILM" at top)



- 1.4 What would make you stop and watch a film on social media? What would make you watch to the end? What would make you share it?
- 1.5 Can you think of any examples of films about social issues/health that you've seen and liked? What did you like about it? How did you come across it?
- 1.6 If a film asked you to answer a poll/question or select an option/ending, would you do it? Can you give an example of a clip where you have done this? (buy the condoms? can be used as an illustration)
- 1.7 How long should a film on consent be?

Show 3 film clips (whistling, basketball, tell me what you want – buy the condoms? can be used if more discussion is needed on interactivity). Ask for a gut/brief response following each one. At the end of all 3/4:

- 1.8 Which did you like best and why?
- 1.9 Which would you be most likely to watch if it came up on your social media feed? Would you share it?
- 1.10 Which communicates the message most effectively? What message do you take from it?
- 1.11 If not already covered - any features that are attractive to you? (prompts: form (live action, animation), sound (phone on silent?), look/feel/tone, humour, length, relevance, message)
- 1.12 Thoughts on how you could improve these films?

Individual Interview

Ethics: will be talking more personally, but they don't have to answer any questions they don't want to and can stop the interview at any time. Remind re: confidentiality, recording, personal support.

Demographic sheet

- 2.1 Do you remember learning anything about consent in school? Are there other places where you have learned about/talked about consent?
- 2.2 Is consent something that you and your friends talk about? What do you/they talk about? Can you give me an example/story? (negative/ positive, relationship/one-off, media/TV)
- 2.3 Is enjoying sex/not enjoying sex something that you and your friends talk about? About specific situations or in general?

(Flipchart 2 may be used as a reference)

- 2.4 We talked in the group about what makes it easier/harder to talk about what you want/don't want sexually with a partner and about what they want/don't want. How easy do you think this is (use very easy, easy, not sure, not very, not at all – if helpful)? What makes it easier/harder?



- 2.5 We talked in the group about what sex looks/feels like when communication is good. Can you summarise what makes for good communication? What does it look/feel like? Is this what generally happens do you think?
- 2.6 Can you think of any scenes in films or TV programmes that show good examples of communicating consent?
- 2.7 How much of communicating consent is verbal/non-verbal? (give percentages) When might communication move from being non-verbal to verbal? What might the person say (option to write down)?
- 2.8 In your experience do young people talk about what they like/don't like/consent with their partner, outside of sexual situations? Is this easier/harder than talking during sex?
- 2.9 Do you think it is more important to get consent for certain things than others? (first kiss, penetration, condom, anal, kinks – anything else?)
- 2.10 What do you think it feels like to say 'no' to something? (anxieties, considerations, gender) How might the other person feel/react?
- 2.11 Does communicating consent change in different types of relationships/ over time?
- 2.12 Some young people have told us that they feel more able to say what they want with time and experience. What messages or support would help younger young people with consent? What messages or support would your younger self have liked? (note – build up key messages to check out with other young people through fieldwork)
- 2.13 Anything else to add to what we have spoken about?

End interview. Thank participant and check whether they would wish any support or debriefing following interview. Give voucher.

