

# VIOLENCE REDUCTION

## Good Practice Case Studies

LB Waltham Forest  
Is This OK? Chatbot

*When feedback from young people showed that they were more likely to seek help from professionals via text and online chat, LB Waltham Forest's innovative Chatbot was created to provide an ideal gateway to services for young people who may be particularly vulnerable to online exploitation and grooming.*



Pictured: Cllr Ahsan Khan, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, with Sara Rowbotham and three young people who consulted in creating the chatbot: Benjamin Dibba, Kamahl Miller and Ellie Morris

### The Problem

Young people at risk of, or experiencing, grooming, exploitation and abuse often do not ask for help. Consultations have shown there is a perception that they are too old for traditional support services for children.

Exploitative relationships and grooming often begin online. Feedback from young people to support staff in the borough has indicated that they are more likely to seek help from professionals via text and online chat where these channels are available, as opposed to face to face contact.

### Proposed solution

A new digital gateway, piloting the use of chatbot<sup>1</sup> technology to connect young people at risk to the correct support, so that they feel better informed about potential risks and how to stay safe. The screenshot (right) shows how the chatbot initiates a conversation with a young person:

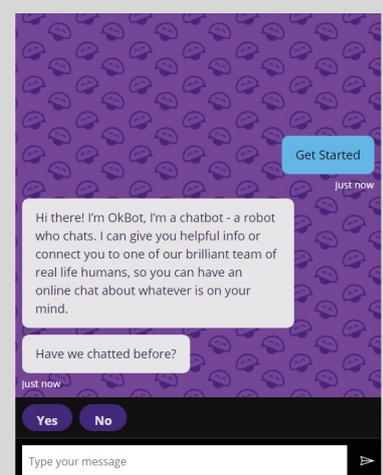
### Approach:

- A multi-agency partnership between ChildLine, Missing People, Waltham Forest Council and Bradford Council was established alongside tech partners and a media agency. Leading this partnership is Sara Rowbotham, the youth worker who blew the whistle on the sexual

1. A chatbot is a [software](#) application used to conduct an on-line chat [conversation](#) via text or text-to-speech, in lieu of providing direct contact with a live human agent

### Partners involved

**LB Waltham Forest**  
**Bradford MDC**  
**ChildLine**  
**Missing People**



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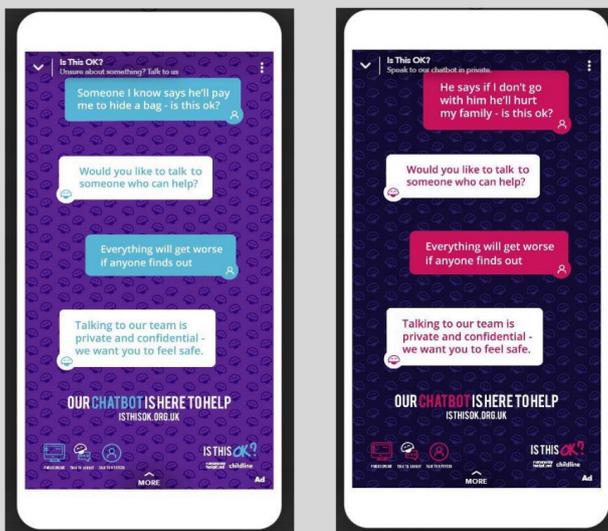
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exploitation of young women in Rochdale. As an NHS sexual health worker, she detailed over 180 cases of sexual abuse in Rochdale between 2005 and 2011, reporting to an official enquiry that bosses had ignored warnings of grooming and exploitation.

- Marketing was created through consultation with young people via focus groups and a marketing survey. Young people also had direct input on the design and delivery of the service.
- Snapchat adverts have consistently performed the best amongst young people, with more than 2.5 million impressions and 19,500 swipe ups (the number of young people clicking through to the website). Two examples are shown below:

Snapchat adverts have consistently performed the best amongst young people, with more than 2.5 million impressions and 19,500 swipe ups



- Training was received by around 30 staff involved in the pilot across both organisations. This was to do with the principles and values of the project.
- A practice guide was drawn up and an online training tool was developed for current and future staff.
- Live chats are available between the following hours (though the chatbot and advice and guidance were available 24 hours a day):
  - Monday: 2.30pm – 1.30am
  - Tuesday: 2.30am – midnight
  - Wednesday: 2.30pm – 1.30am
  - Thursday: 2.30pm – 9.30pm
  - Friday: 2.30pm – midnight
  - Saturday: midnight – 7.30am and 2.30pm – midnight
  - Sunday: midnight – 7.30am and 2.30pm - 1.30am



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### Outcomes

- 2,000 young people informed about the service – via professionals and marketing
- 150 young people use the service during the initial pilot period.
- Young people at risk of / experiencing exploitation to have access to support and to recognise potential risks and acts of grooming and exploitation.
- Young people to be equipped with strategies to stay safe.

### Current picture

During the initial pilot period, the chatbot was accessed by over 1,000 young people across the two pilot sites, Waltham Forest and Bradford, with 333 young people asking to chat with a real person. Eighty per cent of the young people using the live chat were girls/young women.

Young people have consistently reported that emotional wellbeing and mental health were the areas being impacted the most as a result of the concerns/ issues that they had raised.

The top three topics that young people most commonly wanted further information about were: relationships; running away; and mental health.

2.30pm – 10pm have consistently been the core hours with the most traffic.

Covid / lockdown has seen a reduction in young people accessing the chatbot. This has also been seen across other online support services for young people in the borough. As such, consultation has taken place with young people to explore further. This has also fed into an update of marketing materials for digital marketing campaigns.

Cllr Ahsan Khan, Cabinet Member for Community Safety has been keenly engaged with the development of Is This Ok? and has said: "Is This Ok? will give vulnerable young people the means to check whether what is happening in their lives is acceptable and the vital support they need if it isn't".

A third of young people using the live chat reported they were currently experiencing issues relating to coercive control, sexual violence and physical violence



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### Learning

- Having young people involved in the design and marketing for Is This Ok? was crucial to developing a service that meets the needs of young people. Going forward, there needs some specific thought on how to ensure boys/young men feel able to engage with the service.
- Due to the need to build in and test rigorously a range of safeguarding measures, and to integrate the chatbot with both Missing People and Childline's existing systems, the tech was more complex to develop than expected.

### Next steps

Additional funding has been secured from BBC Children in Need, meaning that the service can be further developed:

- To extend into additional pilot sites across the UK.
- To increase the number of boys/young men accessing the support service via targeted marketing and consultation with young people.
- Implement technical developments.
- There is an ongoing evaluation of the pilot.

### Contact

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Waltham Forest

