Star

Pears Foundation

COMMISSION INTO COUNTERING ONLINE CONSPIRACIES IN SCHOOLS

2026 RESEARCH INSIGHTS

DR. SALLY BURTONSHAW, MICHAEL KANE, JULES WALKDEN, ED DORRELL,
AMY BRAIER, GEORGE RYAN, SEB WRIDE

MARCH 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ongoing work of the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools would not be possible without the generous contributions of a wide range of people and organisations who were willing to share their time and expertise.

We would like to start by thanking all of the school staff, parents and young people who continue to share their opinions, thoughts and experiences with us throughout this research. The Commission's ability to understand the ever-evolving challenges faced by young people is only possible because of their insights and we are determined to use them to create positive change.

This Commission is co-chaired by Sir Mufti Hamid Patel and Sir Trevor Pears and led by a team of expert Commissioners. Their commitment to the Commission's long-term work, as well as their deep and intersectional expertise, enables us to tackle the multifaceted and fast-moving challenges that misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief present.

The Commission is facilitated by Public First, and we would like to thank Dr. Sally Burtonshaw, Ed Dorrell, Michael Kane, George Ryan, Jules Walkden and Seb Wride for their work. Their policy and research expertise, combined with their deep understanding of, and commitment to, the young people, school staff and leaders sits at the heart of the Commission's activity.

A huge thanks to the Pears Foundation and, in particular, to Executive Chair Sir Trevor Pears and Director Amy Braier who conceived of, and generously funded, the Commission from the outset, and continue to do so. At all times, they have respected the independence of the Commissioners and the research findings.

The Commission continues to benefit from the wide expertise of the Advisory Board drawn from the Pears Foundation's grantees, comprising civil society leaders with expertise across a range of relevant fields, who kindly support the Commission's work.

About Pears Foundation

Pears Foundation is an independent family foundation that invests over £20 million each year in a wide range of charitable organisations and causes. The Foundation is known for its relational approach, building long-term relationships with grantees and giving unrestricted funding and support beyond grants. Pears Foundation's work is broad-ranging, spanning education, mental health, poverty alleviation, social action, civic engagement, social cohesion and the intersection between these issues. The Pears family has given more than £500m to charitable causes since the Foundation was established.

FOREWORD

In the year since the publication of the Commission's inaugural research report, concern and debate about the impact of online misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief on young people, schools and wider society has only intensified – and for good reason. What was already a fast-moving challenge is becoming harder still, driven by the unprecedented pace of AI-generated content and the ways in which geopolitical actors can shape and influence the online information environment.

Yet, despite the growing attention this issue receives in public discussion, schools continue to face it with limited clarity on what works, uneven support, and too little time and resource.

It was precisely this gap – between the scale of the problem, understanding how it manifests, and translating that into support for those on the frontline – that led to the creation of the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools, and it is what continues to drive our work. In the Commission's second year, we pledged both to continue researching and track how conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation are affecting young people, and to begin implementing the recommendations set out in our first report. This report provides an update on that commitment.

Our fresh research shows that young people, parents and school staff increasingly recognise not just the prevalence of misleading content online, but also see it as a growing source of concern. Young people describe finding it harder to tell what is real and what is not, and they place 'fake news' among their most significant online worries. Teachers tell us they are drawn into difficult – and sometimes adversarial – conversations in classrooms, often without training, lacking confidence, and with a fear of complaint or misinterpretation. Critically, the evidence reinforces that this is not an issue confined to older pupils: primary schools are encountering it too, with younger children being exposed to offensive and harmful material at an age when their ability to assess it critically is still developing.

At the same time, the findings underline the vital role that families play. Parents remain young people's most trusted source of information, yet parents themselves are navigating the same online environment and are not immune to conspiracy belief and misleading narratives. For teachers and school leaders, this can compound the challenge – not only because misinformation can be reinforced at home, but because concerns about parental backlash can inhibit staff from addressing certain topics directly.

Over the course of this phase of the Commission's work, we have spoken again to teachers and wider school staff, parents, youth workers, and – most importantly – young people themselves. The story they tell is clear: the problem is growing, it is changing, and it is reaching further into school life. There is also a strong sense that schools must be part of the solution, including through media literacy and critical thinking. This is supported by pupils, parents and teachers alike. But the message is equally clear that schools cannot do this alone. Increased awareness, including through changes to safeguarding guidance, is welcome – but awareness must be matched with practical tools, training, clearer guidance, and the confidence to act.

Our hope is that the findings in this report will make a significant contribution to the way schools, trusts, policymakers and the wider education and youth sectors respond to this challenge – and to the support that is put in place for those working with children and young people every day.

We would like to thank everyone who has given their time, expertise and candour to the Commission's work so far – and especially the young people, school staff and parents who continue to share their experiences with us.

As the Commission enters its third year, we reiterate our commitment to tackling misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief among young people – and to ensuring that those on the frontline are better equipped to respond.

Sir Trevor Pears CMG
Executive Chair of the Pears Foundation

Sir Mufti Hamid Patel
CEO of Star Academies

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THE COMMISSION

Co-Chairs

Sir Trevor Pears CMG, Co-Chair of the Commission and Executive Chair, Pears Foundation

Sir Trevor Pears is Executive Chair of Pears Foundation, establishing the Foundation alongside his brothers Mark and David to fund organisations and projects working to deliver progress on key issues affecting the wellbeing of people in the UK and all over the world. The Pears family has given more than £500 million to charity since the Foundation was established. Sir Trevor is a Director of the William Pears Group, the Pears family's property business. He was made a CMG in 2011 and was awarded a Knighthood for services to philanthropy in 2017.

Sir Mufti Hamid Patel CBE, Co-Chair of the Commission and CEO, Star Academies

Sir Mufti Hamid Patel is the Chief Executive of Star Academies. He has led the trust since its inception. He is passionate about the highest of ambition for children and young people from the most disadvantaged communities across the country, and this vision has guided the philosophy of the trust and his own work in particular. Widely recognised as one of the UK's leading educational voices, Hamid was made a CBE in 2015 and awarded a knighthood in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2021.

Commissioners

Amy Braier, Director, Pears Foundation

Amy Braier has been Director of Pears Foundation since 2012, having previously worked in policy roles at the Greater London Authority and the Antisemitism Policy Trust. She works closely with Sir Trevor and the Pears family to help them achieve their philanthropic vision, leading the Foundation's operations and professional team and overseeing a varied portfolio of programmes and grants. She is also Chair of Trustees of the Miscarriage Association.

Helena Brothwell, Director of Education, Windsor Academy Trust

Helena Brothwell is the Director of Education at Windsor Academy Trust. Helena is a frequent contributor to discussions of best practice across England's educational landscape and is an experienced teacher and former Principal. She has previously worked as Education Director at Ormiston Academies Trust and Head of School Improvement at David Ross Education Trust.

Professor Arthur Chapman, Professor of History Education, University College London

Professor Arthur Chapman, FRHistS, FHA, EdD, MPhil, MA (Cantab.), PGCE, is Professor of History Education and Head of Department, Curriculum Pedagogy and Assessment at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, and coordinator of IOE's History in Education Special Interest Group. Professor Chapman is an editor of several academic journals and a frequent contributor to global history education discourse. Outside History education, Arthur is a founder member and co-lead of IOE's Curriculum and Subject Specialism Research Group and has worked as a member of both the research and teaching teams in the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education. In 2018-20, he co-led curriculum research and development for ODHIRH/OSCE and UNESCO on Addressing Antisemitism Through Education.

Rachel Huggins, CEO, Internet Matters

Rachel was part of the team that launched Internet Matters in 2014 and became CEO in January 2026. She has created award-winning public awareness campaigns to support parents on issues of children's online safety and established the Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index. Her background includes strategic planning and marketing roles in media, financial services, retail and publishing, with over 10 years of experience working for Sky, one of Internet Matters' founding members.

Gareth Conyard, CEO, Teacher Development Trust (TDT)

Gareth Conyard is CEO of the TDT. Between 2003-2022, Gareth worked at the Department for Education on a range of policies from early years to higher education. Most recently, he led the development and delivery of the Early Career Framework and reformed National Professional Qualifications. He also spent two years as an Education Adviser at the Department of International Development, focusing on girls' education and multilateral investment.

Smita Jamdar, Head of Education, Shakespeare Martineau

Smita Jamdar is Partner and Head of Education at law firm Shakespeare Martineau. She is a recognised leader in her field, specialising in constitutional, governance and regulatory advice that helps educational institutions thrive in a rapidly changing landscape. She has helped institutions to innovate and develop, to widen their reach, build institutional resilience, and deliver the best outcomes for students and other stakeholders. Smita has also been recognised in the Legal 500 as a leading individual in education.

Chris Morris, CEO, Full Fact

Chris is an award-winning journalist and CEO of Full Fact. Prior to joining Full Fact in October 2023, Chris was the BBC's first dedicated fact-checker on air and online, pioneering fact-checking on mainstream outlets through his development and leadership of BBC Reality Check.

Ndidi Okezie, CEO, Business in the Community

Ndidi Okezie OBE is Chief Executive of Business in the Community, the UK's largest responsible business network. A cross-sector coalition builder with over 20 years' experience driving transformational change across education, youth, government and corporate sectors. Ndidi serves as Chair of the People and Nominations Committee at the Southbank Centre.

Professor Dame Alison Peacock, CEO, Chartered College of Teaching

Professor Dame Alison Peacock is CEO of the Chartered College of Teaching. Prior to becoming CEO of the Chartered College of Teaching, Professor Dame Alison Peacock was Executive Headteacher of The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire. Her career to date has spanned primary, secondary and advisory roles. In 2018, she became an Honorary Fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge, one of the first ever female Fellows admitted. She is also a Visiting Professor of both the University of Hertfordshire and Glyndwr University.

Melanie Renowden, CEO, National Institute of Teaching

Melanie has been the Chief Executive Officer of the National Institute of Teaching (NIoT), the new specialist higher education institute for the teaching profession, since its foundation in 2022. Melanie has spent nearly 30 years working in education. Most recently she was an executive director at Star Academies. Prior to this, she was the CEO at Ambition Institute, an Education Director at Business in the Community and has also held trustee and governor roles across schools, multi-academy trusts and education charities.

Under Melanie's leadership, the NIoT recently launched the Centre for Digital Information Literacy in Schools. The Centre, which has been generously supported by the Pears Foundation, will deliver a national programme to equip educators with the knowledge, confidence, and tools to teach and lead effectively in an age of misinformation.

Rachel Sylvester, Political Editor, The Observer

Rachel Sylvester is the Political Editor at the Observer. She started writing about politics in 1996 and was a lobby correspondent on The Daily Telegraph before becoming political editor of The Independent on Sunday. She joined The Times in 2008 and has since chaired both the Times Education Commission and the Times Health Commission. Rachel is currently chairing The Times Crime and Justice Commission which aims to address the most urgent issues facing the police, prisons, courts and victims of crime.

Sara Sinaguglia, Deputy Headteacher

Sara Sinaguglia is a Deputy Headteacher, teaching history, religious education and politics. She has provided the Commission with the invaluable perspective of a frontline teacher and won a silver award in 2019 for Teacher of the Year in a Secondary School at the Pearson National Teaching Awards. She holds an MA in Applied Educational Leadership from the UCL IOE Centre for Educational Leadership and is a graduate of the Beacon School programme from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education.

Jolanta Lasota, Chief Executive, Ambitious about Autism

Jolanta is Chief Executive of Ambitious about Autism, including the School Trust. She Chairs two sector infrastructure bodies – Autism Education Trust and the Autism Alliance. She is a Trustee of UK Youth. Her career includes Director roles in national voluntary sector organisations, including I CAN and the Governance Hub (a national body set up to support the governance of the third sector).

Sam French, Assistant Director, The Harris Federation

Sam is an Assistant Director for the Harris Federation, a multi academy trust of 55 primary and secondary schools working across London and Essex. 44,000 young people are taught in a Harris school. In addition to working closely with a cluster of primary schools, Sam leads on the curriculum for all of the primary academies.

Advisory Board

The Commission's Advisory Board comprises Pears Foundation grantees who have provided relevant expertise to the Commission across a wide variety of sectors and disciplines. They have been invaluable in providing feedback, advice and counsel throughout each phase of the Commission.

Ali Amla
Solutions Not Sides

Julie Bentley
Samaritans

Dr. Glenn Bezalel
City of London School

Sharon Booth
Solutions Not Sides

Linda Cowie
The Linking Network

Jessica Deighton
Anna Freud

Professor Stuart Foster
UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

Jeremy Hayward
UCL Institute of Education

Meg Henry
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Dame Carol Homden CBE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools was established by Pears Foundation and Public First in March 2024 to build the evidence base on how conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation are affecting young people and school communities, and to translate that evidence into practical action.

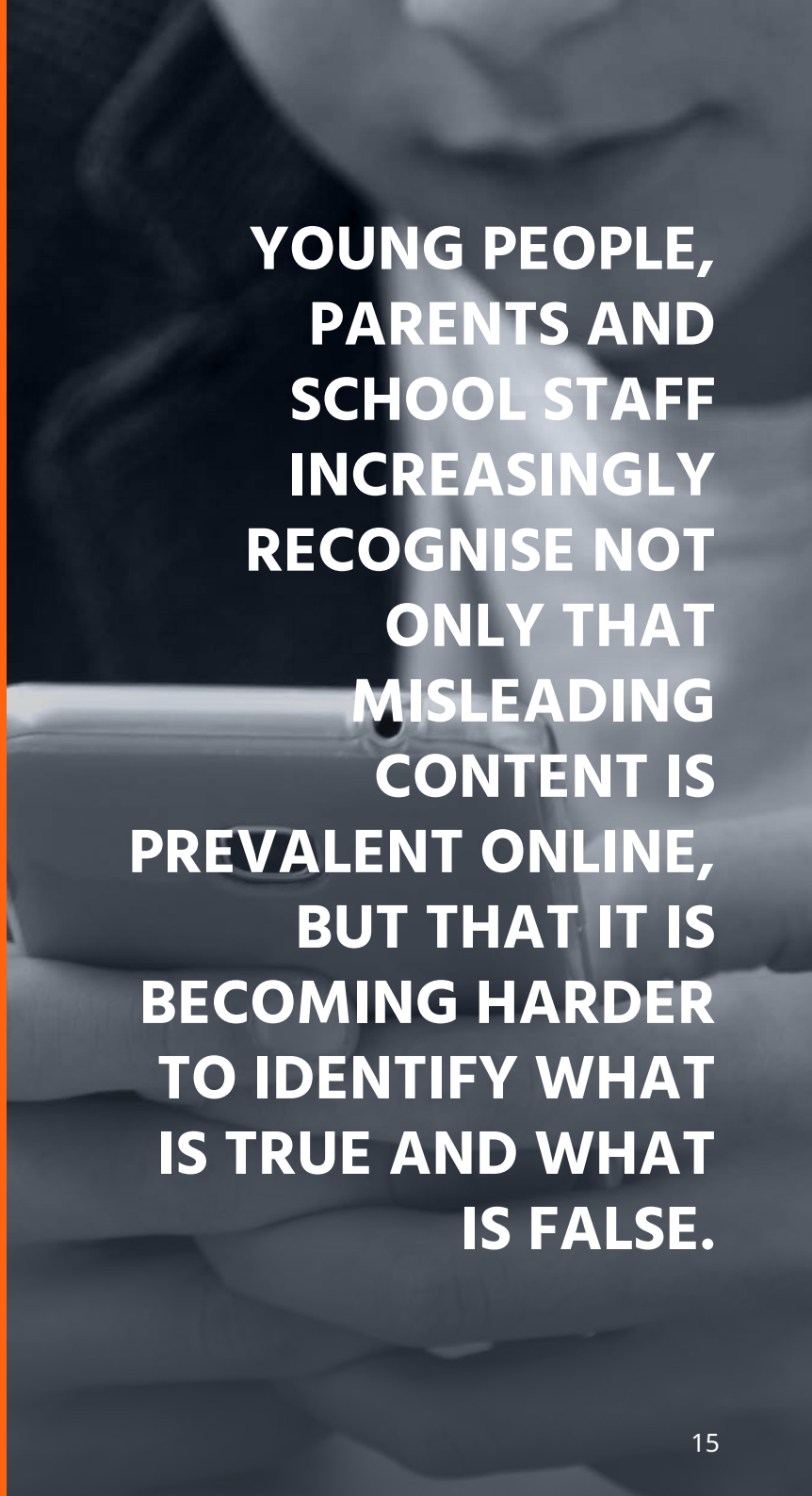
In our first report, published in February 2025, we found that academic definitions of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief are not understood in the same way by the public.[1] Tackling this issue requires getting out of rarified theoretical discussions and meeting young people – and those who support them – where they are at. We found that young people and adults occupy information siloes; they are not accessing the same information in the same ways, and this presents a challenge for understanding how this misinformation is affecting young people and tackling it. We found that trust in teachers and, critically, parents is high amongst young people, but it declines over the course of their education. However, neither group feel confident nor equipped to address misinformation with young people. We committed to further research to deepen our understanding of how this problem is manifesting and evolving amongst children and young people.

This report presents the Commission's second-year research insights, drawing on quantitative and qualitative fieldwork with young people aged 9–18, parents, school staff and youth workers, to track how attitudes and experiences are changing over time and what action is most needed.

Across all groups, the headline picture is one of growing concern. **Young people, parents and school staff increasingly recognise not only that misleading content is prevalent online, but that it is becoming harder to identify what is true and what is false**. Fake news is now among young people's most significant concerns about the online world, second only to cyberbullying and online harassment. School staff report that misinformation and conspiracy beliefs are appearing more frequently in classroom discussions, often leading to adversarial exchanges between staff and pupils.

A crucial development in this year's research is the **association between rising misinformation and the rapid proliferation of generative AI content**. Young people report frequent exposure to AI-generated images and videos, including deepfakes. Both pupils and teachers describe a growing sense of powerlessness in attempting to keep up with the pace and sophistication of this content. While some young people believe they can spot AI-generated material, they often rely on superficial cues rather than robust checks of provenance, source credibility or corroboration.

1 Burtonshaw et. al (2025). Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools Report. Accessed: www.counteringconspiracies.co.uk



The research also underlines that exposure is not confined to older adolescents. Our research shows that **conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation are increasingly prevalent in primary settings**. Particularly concerning is the level of exposure to offensive material including sexist, racist and homophobic content among younger pupils as well as older teenagers. This reinforces the need for interventions to begin far earlier than secondary school.

We know **that families play a central role in shaping how children and young people interpret and share information**. Young people consistently cite parents or carers as their most trusted source of information. However, parents themselves report difficulty identifying what is true and false online, and young people commonly describe experiences of parents believing something online that they know to be untrue. For school staff, this compounds the challenge: misinformation may be reinforced at home, and teachers can feel inhibited from addressing sensitive or politicised topics for fear of parental complaints or accusations of bias.

There is, nonetheless, strong consensus on where some of the solutions may lie. **Young people and parents support the introduction of media literacy education into the curriculum**, and a majority of teachers support embedding media literacy and critical thinking across subjects. However, school staff report feeling ill-equipped and under-resourced to tackle this issue. A substantial proportion have received no training on countering online conspiracies and misinformation and, where training exists, it is often minimal and delivered internally, with a lack of high-quality, evidence-led resources or support to do so.

Updates to guidance, notably Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE), to include specific references to addressing conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation, **has increased awareness of the issue amongst school staff, but it has not yet translated into greater confidence or clearer practice in real classroom situations**.

Finally, we know that schools cannot tackle these issues alone and, for the first time this year, the Commission has explored the role of youth workers and the youth sector. We heard that **youth workers recognise misinformation and conspiracy belief as a real issue in their interactions with young people; however, they often see these issues as secondary to, rather than inherent in, the wider challenges facing the young people they support**. This points to the importance of ensuring the youth sector has accessible tools and training that can be integrated into wider safeguarding and support work.

The Commission remains committed to building the evidence base and supporting practical action so that those working with children and young people are better equipped to respond.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARENTS SUPPORT THE INTRODUCTION OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION INTO THE CURRICULUM

DEFINITIONS

Throughout the primary research and this report, we have used the following working definitions of each of the three key technical terms that we are investigating as part of this research.

- **A conspiracy theory** is a proposed explanation of historical, current, or speculative events in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret.

- **Misinformation** is incorrect, misleading, or false information that stems from error or misunderstanding.

- **Disinformation** is misinformation that has been spread deliberately.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

FINDING 1

Conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation are increasingly seen as a problem by young people, parents and school staff.

FINDING 2

Teachers and young people warned that the rise in online conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation is tied to the growth of generative AI content.

FINDING 3

Children and young people are accessing conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation online from a young age, including offensive content.

FINDING 4

Parents play an active role in the spread of conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst young people.

FINDING 5

Teachers feel that parents both compound the challenges of, and complicate their ability to address, online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst young people.

FINDING 6

Teachers, parents and young people all support the introduction of media literacy into the curriculum.

FINDING 7

However, school staff continue to feel ill-equipped, under-resourced and nervous in tackling online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation… and this is particularly so amongst primary staff.

FINDING 8

The inclusion of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief within KCSIE has increased awareness of teachers but it has not improved confidence in addressing the challenge.

FINDING 9

The lack of clarity within political impartiality guidance is inhibiting teachers' ability to address conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation.

FINDING 10

Youth workers recognise that conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation is an issue amongst young people, although they see this in the context of wider societal challenges.

CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ARE INCREASINGLY SEEN AS A PROBLEM BY YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF

SUMMARY

- Young people, parents and school staff all recognise that online misinformation is becoming more common.

- But it is not just an issue of prevalence - conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation are also increasingly seen to be a problem that worries all three groups.

- When it comes to specific concerns about the internet and time online, fake news is the second biggest issue young people face, behind only cyberbullying.

FINDING 1 - CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ARE INCREASINGLY SEEN AS A PROBLEM BY YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF.

Given the ongoing profile of misinformation and disinformation in public discussion, it is perhaps unsurprising that recognition of online misinformation has increased over the last twelve months since the Commission's initial research.[2] Both parents and teachers recognised the increasing prominence of conspiracy beliefs, misinformation and disinformation amongst children and young people. The proportion of parents who reported that their children have raised a conspiracy theory with them rose from 28% in 2024 to 38% in 2025, an increase of roughly one third. This increased profile of conspiracy theories was also recognised by teachers; with a 7% increase in the number who reported a pupil bringing up a conspiracy theory with them (74% to 81%).

Teachers in our qualitative research gave examples of particular conspiracy theories that young people had raised. Examples included conspiracy beliefs related to current affairs such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, Tommy Robinson and the death of Charlie Kirk, and historic conspiracy theories such as those surrounding 9/11 and the sinking of the Titanic.

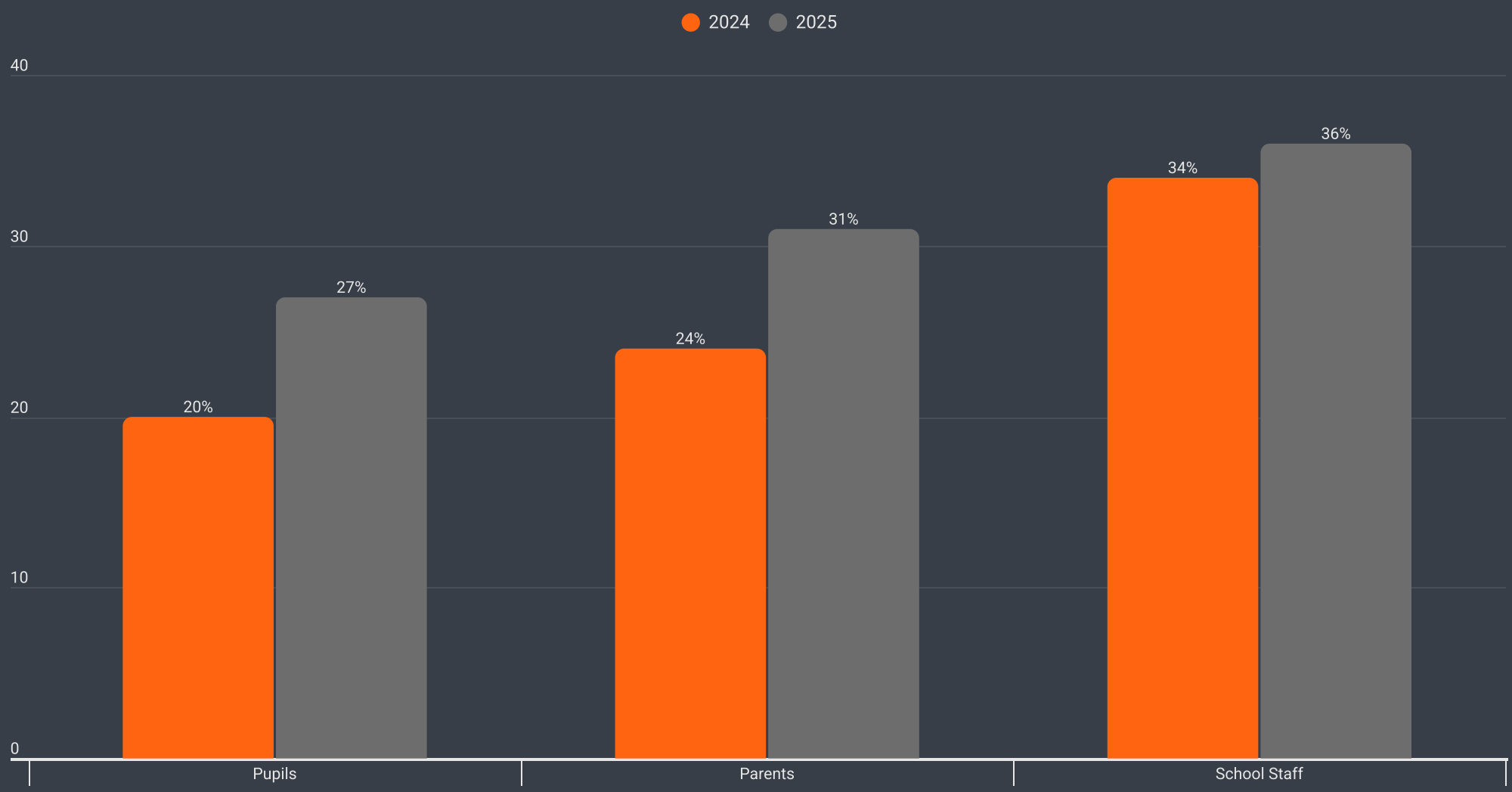
Importantly, it was not just the prevalence of misinformation which was identified; conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation are also increasingly seen to be a problem which concerned all three groups. This was particularly so amongst young people, where we saw a 35% year-on-year increase in those who considered conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation to be an issue in their schools, and parents, with a 29% increase between 2024 and 2025.

2 Burtonshaw et al. (2025). Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools Report. Accessed: https://counteringconspiracies.co.uk/

"Those [pupils] that do rear their heads, I feel like they are boys who want to just be sensationalist and say something just to because they want to draw attention to themselves. It's hard to work out whether they actually believe it, or are they just saying it because they really enjoy being loud and brash and centre of attention. For example, one that springs to mind was when we were talking about what's happening in Ukraine, and then one of the boys said 'but it's Russia's land, and they have every right to go in there' and they just want it to be really confrontational with other people in the class."

Middle Leader, Primary, Male, East of England

FINDING 1 - CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ARE INCREASINGLY SEEN AS A PROBLEM BY YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF.



Graph 1: Percentage who say conspiracy theories are a problem in their or their children's school

FINDING 1 - CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ARE INCREASINGLY SEEN AS A PROBLEM BY YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF.

Students, parents and school staff all felt that it was harder to tell what was real and fake online; 71% of students, 78% of parents and 85% of school staff either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

Young people reported that online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation was an increasing problem compared to a range of other challenges they face. 30% of young people identified the spread of fake news as one of the main issues facing young people, making it the third most cited issue behind only mental health and quality of education. Moreover, when asked specifically about the online world, young people identified fake news as the second most significant issue affecting them – with only cyberbullying and online harassment seen to be more of an issue. Fake news was reported to be the single biggest issue for boys (29%), with regards to the internet and their time spent online.

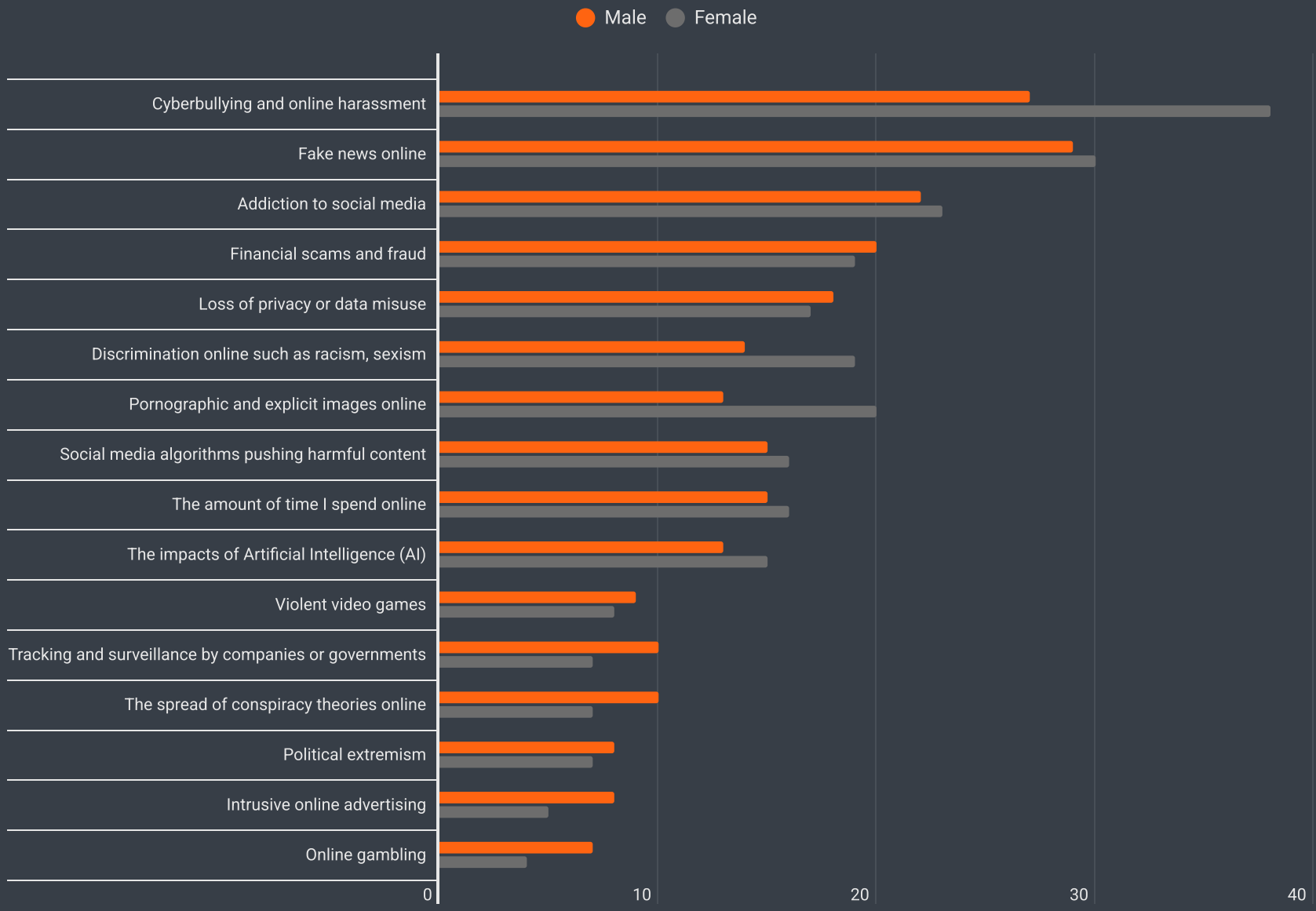
Across our qualitative research, young people reaffirmed this concern about fake news. They felt that online misinformation and disinformation had increased in recent years, compounded by incentives from online platforms whereby outrage increased the amount of engagement with a post.

> **"People can make money off doing fake news, actually, because it gets loads of likes"**
>
> *Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East*

> **"As generations go on, social media is just going to get more and more popular and as is technology in general. So I feel like, as the years go on, it [misinformation] is just going to get spread around, and more people get involved with it, which can be a bad thing."**
>
> *Year 10 Pupil, Female, North East*

> **"They [children] are bombarded with so much on social media. When I was younger you'd watch the news that like in the morning, possibly then at 6pm and then at 10pm and that was sort of it. But now they can get access to news all the time, some of it fake news. It's difficult when it's in your face all the time, and there's kind of no let up, because they're watching on their phones a lot the time or tablets, and some children are accessing their phones, probably quite late at night…. Yeah it's this kind of access to media all the time and not being able to kind of differentiate the kind of the real and the fake of it all."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, West Midlands*

FINDING 1 - CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ARE INCREASINGLY SEEN AS A PROBLEM BY YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF.



Graph 2: Thinking about the internet and the time you spend online, which of the following are you most concerned about if any? Select up to three of the following [9-18-year-old pupils]

TEACHERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE WARNED THAT THE RISE IN ONLINE CONSPIRACY THEORIES, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IS TIED TO THE GROWTH OF GENERATIVE AI CONTENT

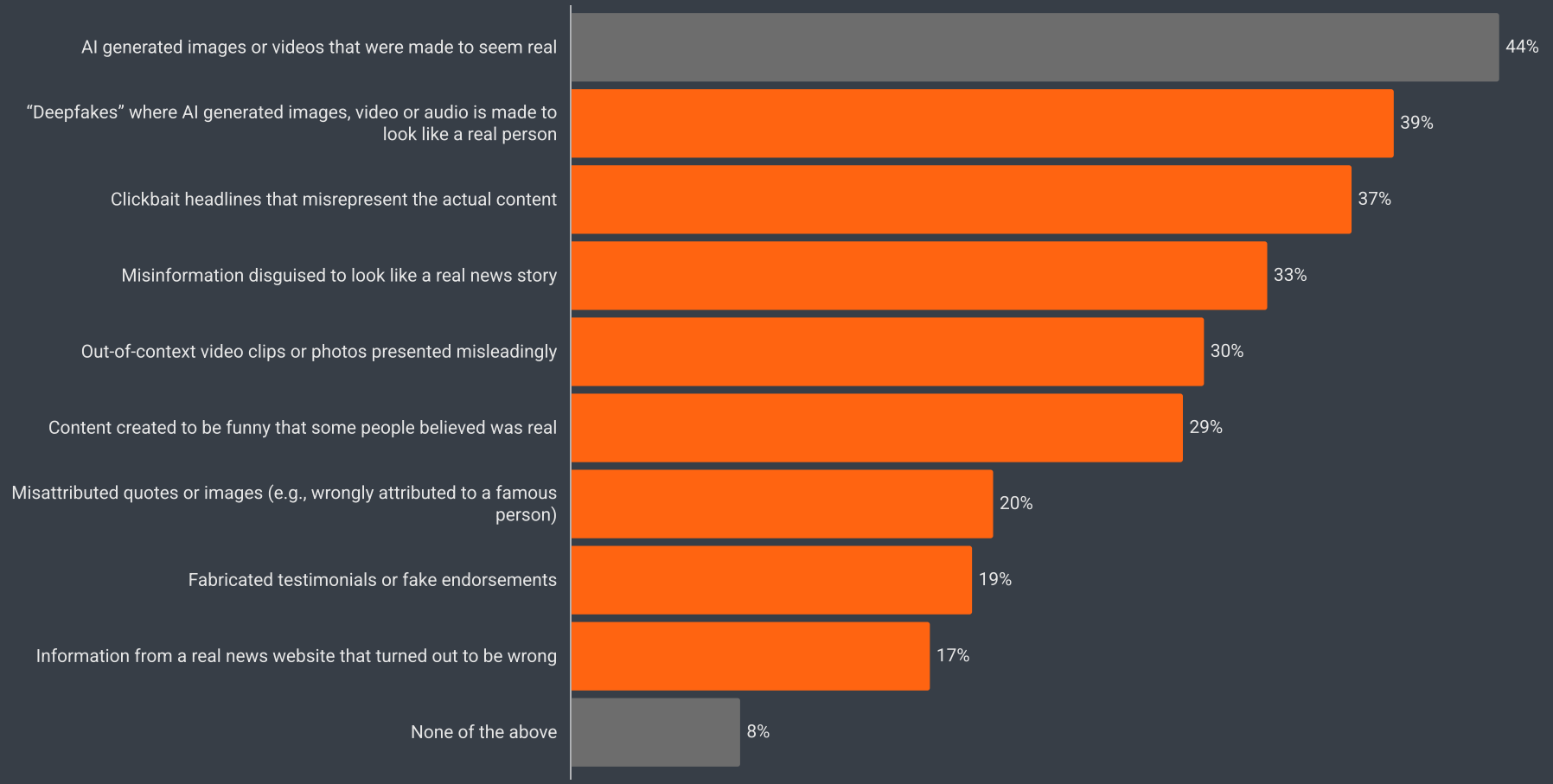
SUMMARY

- AI is seen as a growing issue amongst young people who find it increasingly difficult to identify what was real.
- Teachers also raised AI as a key concern in countering misinformation and disinformation online.
- The scale and quality of AI content was seen as a significant change in how misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief was being spread online.

FINDING 2 - TEACHERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE WARNED THAT THE RISE IN ONLINE CONSPIRACY THEORIES, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IS TIED TO THE GROWTH OF GENERATIVE AI CONTENT

The proliferation of online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation was associated with increasing generative AI content. Of the misleading content or fake news that young people had seen online, 44% of young people reported seeing 'AI generated images or videos that were made to seem real' in the last month and 39% of young people reported seeing 'deepfakes' – where AI generated images, videos or audio is made to seem real in the same time period. Conversely, only 10% of 11-18-year-olds said they had not encountered any fake news in the last month. Given this data relies on young people who have identified the content they are viewing as fake, this is still likely to be a significant underreporting of the scale of misleading content that young people face.

In our qualitative research, young people raised concerns about how the increasing use of AI was making it harder to tell what is true and fake online. There was a sense of powerlessness to identify AI generated content in the face of both its increasing pace and improving 'quality'.



Graph 3: Which forms of misleading content, or "fake news", have you encountered online in the last month? Select any which apply [9-18-year-old pupils]


16:50
14%
Get Plus
What can I help with?
Create image
Summarize text
Analyze images
More
how to get to

"Sometimes you can't [tell the difference between which videos are real and fake], sometimes they're so good that, you can't actually tell the difference."

Year 10 Pupil, Female, North East

"There's new AI and it's really on point. So if you went on [social media platform] and you typed anything, some of the videos are AI generated, and you don't actually know [if they are real or fake]"

Year 10 Pupil, Male, West Midlands

This marked a notable change from the concerns and focus of our 2024 research, where the issues surrounding AI was far less prominent.

"I rarely ever saw AI, but now it's just basically everywhere"

Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East

"I just think there's loads of AI everywhere now, and you can see something, and you might think it's true, but it's not. It changes the way you look at things."

Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East

Young people were readily able to share specific examples of deepfakes and AI generated videos they had seen.

"Like deep fakes, just people talking but actually not talking. It's just misleading information, it's just not true. It's so controversial. It changes people's ideas about how they look at the world… Elon Musk said this, and he obviously just didn't say that or Keir Starmer said that he is not the Prime Minister anymore. It's just misleading information that shouldn't be shared around"

Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East

Some young people shared a belief that they could identify AI content, however, they often used crude methods to do so. They relied on visual checks or a sense that something wasn't quite right, rather than examining the provenance.

"One time we're doing an assembly, we were being shown this video. It was this man who was shoplifting, but the only way you can tell it was AI is because when he grabbed the box, one of the boxes magically moved backwards without anybody touching it."

Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East

"If a famous celebrity was talking, you could tell if the speaking didn't sound like they were in sync with the voice, or they just didn't it didn't look right, or if there was a certain background of where they're at."

Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East

Teachers also raised concerns about the proliferation of AI and the challenges in supporting young people to discern what was real and fake.

"It's the AI generated videos...there's nothing teaching them about real or fake, or identifying it."

Classroom Teacher, Primary, Male, West Midlands

"Don't even get me started on the use of AI, that whole ability to be able to tell what's real anymore, we don't even have that... you'll have kids come up and show you something that's clearly not real... people can pretty much put whatever they want out there, and there are no repercussions. It's really influential in more ways than I think we even realise."

Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, East of England

FINDING 3

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ACCESSING CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ONLINE FROM A YOUNG AGE, INCLUDING OFFENSIVE CONTENT

SUMMARY

- Exposure to online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation is not just an issue for older pupils.

- Children are accessing conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation online from primary school – and in some cases as early as KS1.

- These younger pupils are being exposed to offensive content, including homophobic, misogynistic and racist material.

It was clear from the Commission's 2025 research that exposure to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy content was not just the preserve of secondary school-aged pupils, and this type of material was being accessed by much younger children. This research demonstrates the scale of this challenge.

88% of all the children and young people aged 11-18 reported having encountered misinformation online in the last month – this does not include any content children and young people did not recognise as misinformation. Of this, 79% of those in Year 7 and 8 reported this to be the case, in comparison to 84% of those in secondary education and 91% aged 16-18.

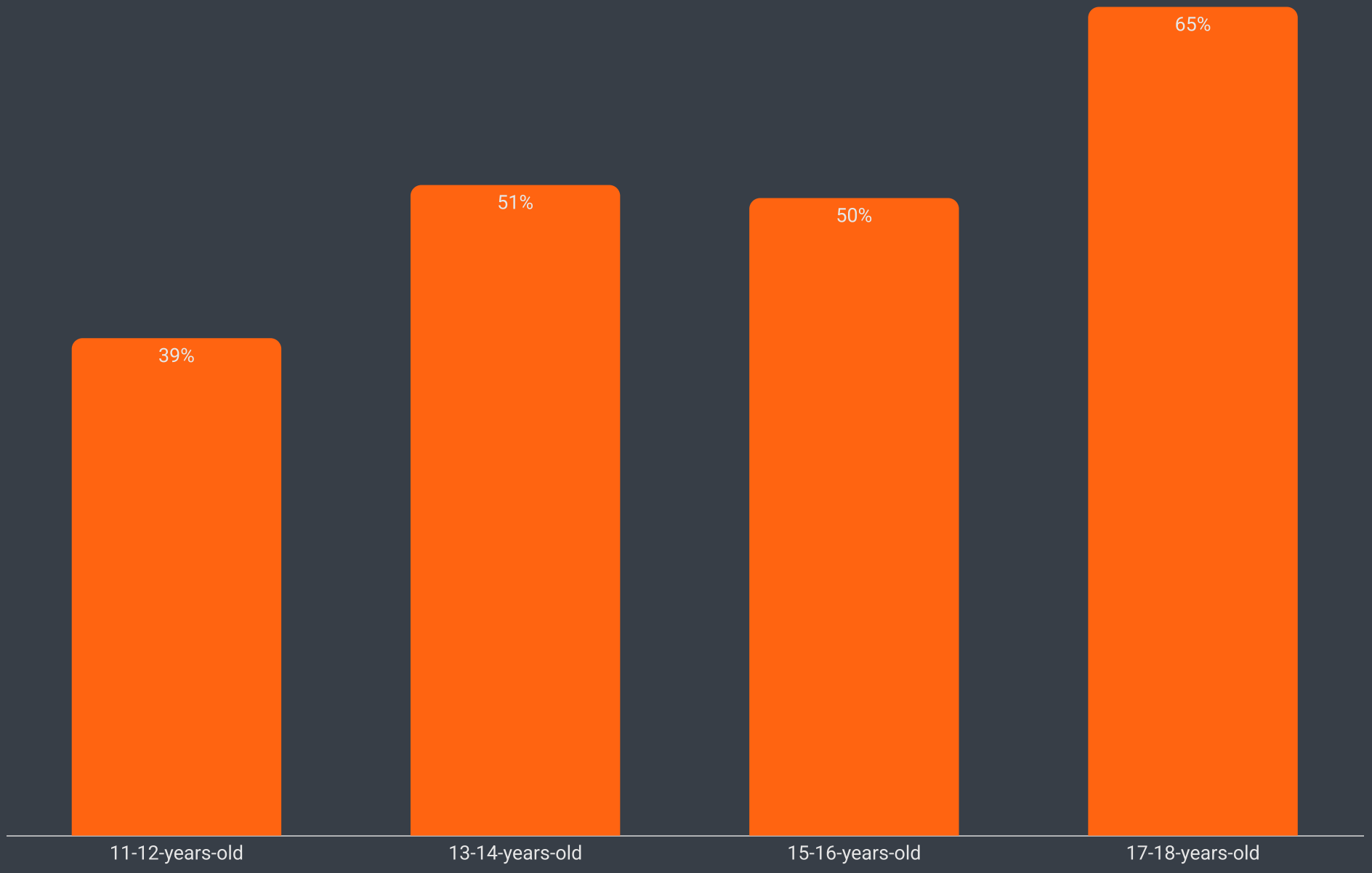
Perhaps most worryingly, in the early years of secondary school, 39% of the youngest secondary pupils (aged 11-12) are being exposed to offensive and misleading content including homophobic, misogynistic and racist material in the last month, growing to 65% of 17–18-year-olds.[3]

Primary school teachers were clear that misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy content were an increasing challenge within primary classrooms, and amongst younger and younger children.

"And then the other thing is the age at which the Andrew Tate stuff becomes important is dropping. So, four years ago, we had four girls in year six were being sexually harassed by a group of six boys. They were using Discord and it felt like misogyny"

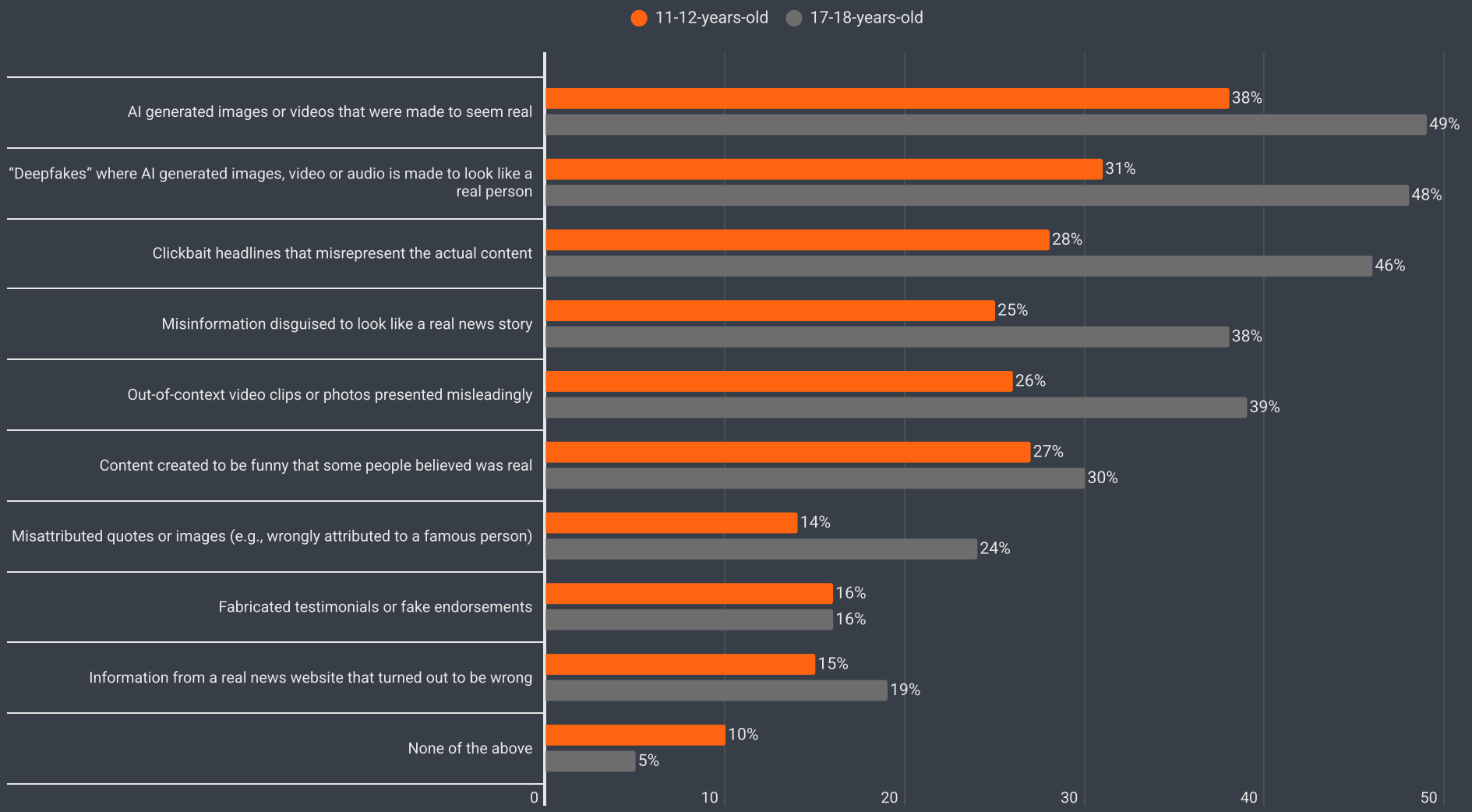
Senior Leader,
Primary, Female, West Midlands

3 For ethical reasons, not all questions in the survey were asked to primary aged pupils. This question was not asked to primary aged pupils.



Graph 4: Percentage of pupils who have encountered false or misleading information that was offensive towards groups of people online (e.g. homophobia, sexism, racism)

Younger pupils in secondary school were also influenced by the rise of AI. 38% of 11-12-year-olds recalled encountering AI generated images or videos were made to seem real, in comparison to 49% of 17-18-year-olds. They were also, perhaps unsurprisingly, less confident in their ability to recognise 'deep fakes' and other AI content; 28% of 9-10-year-olds feel that identifying AI-generated videos is difficult, in comparison to 16% of 17-18-year-olds.



Graph 5: Which forms of misleading content, or "fake news", have you encountered online in the last month? Select any which apply

FINDING 3 – CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ACCESSING CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ONLINE FROM A YOUNG AGE, INCLUDING OFFENSIVE CONTENT

In many cases, the increasing prominence of online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation was linked to children and young people accessing phones and social media. The Commission's original research found that 91% of children have a smartphone by age 11 and were accessing social media regardless of the age restrictions on individual platforms.[4]

Primary classroom teachers and senior leaders both raised concerns about cognitive development of primary pupils to critically analyse online content, as well as the lack of education they were given to navigate an online world. The were concerned that the perception that primary-aged pupils were unlikely to access online content was not only untrue but also led to them do so without any support or education.

> **"The issue we seem to have found is that children are signing up for [social media] and [saying they are] the age of 13. So they are lying about their date of birth… and then when they are 18 years old [on the platform] they are not actually 18. So they get exposed to a lot of information once they hit that magic 18 and I believe that the Andrew Tate stuff gets bombarded on them. And these people who are allegedly 18 might only be 11 years old."**
>
> *Senior Leader, Primary, Female, West Midlands*

And they were clear about the influence this was having on behaviour in the classroom and beyond.

> **"On social media, we are finding that that's coming into primary schools as well, and it's getting earlier and earlier …. so that does bring problems into school. It used to be just Year 6, Year 5, Year 4 and even some of the younger years have access to it [social media]. I think that really does have a big impact."**
>
> *Senior Leader, Primary, Female, West Midlands*

4 Burtonshaw et al. (2025). Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools Report. p. 97. Accessed: https://counteringconspiracies.co.uk/

PARENTS PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

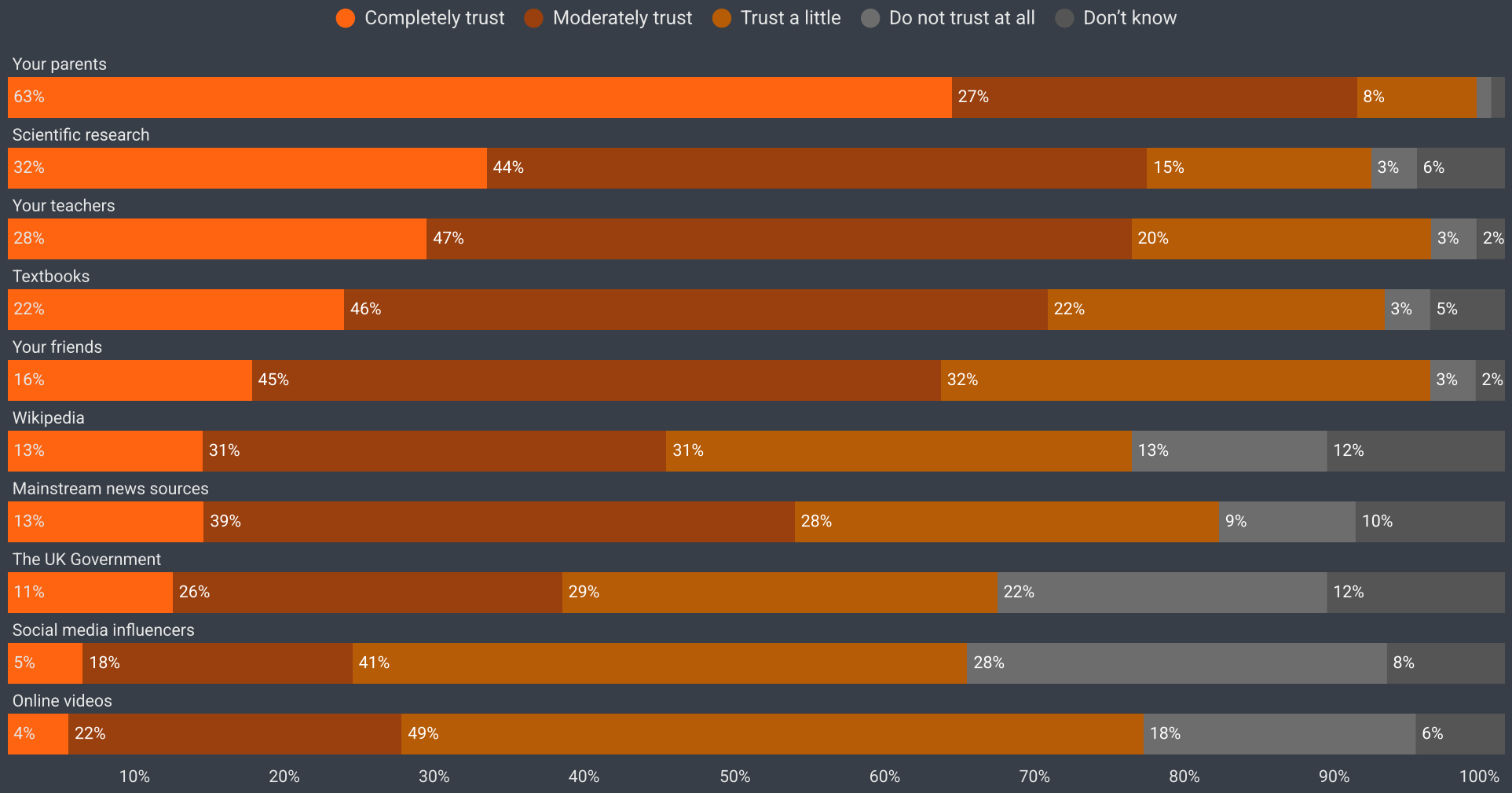
SUMMARY

- Parents and families play a key role in influencing how young people access and process conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation.

- Yet parents themselves are just as vulnerable as young people to conspiracy belief.

- Young people could readily recall a time when their parent or carer had believed they had seen something online that was untrue.

Parents play a vital role in the way in which children and young people access, process and understand conspiracy content, misinformation and disinformation online. Young people across all age groups consistently cited parents as their most trusted source of information, with 90% of children and young people saying they completely or moderately trust a parent, a figure consistent with the research from phase one. Only 1% of children and young people said they did not trust a parent at all. Trust in parents outranked all other sources including scientific research (76%), teachers (75%), textbooks (69%), mainstream news sources (52%) and the UK Government (37%).



Graph 6: In general, how much would you say you trust the following, if at all? [9-18-year-old pupils]

In our qualitative research, young people provided detailed insight into their strong trust in parents to tell them the truth and navigate the world.

"They [parents] have raised you your whole life, so, you got to trust that they would tell the truth to you"

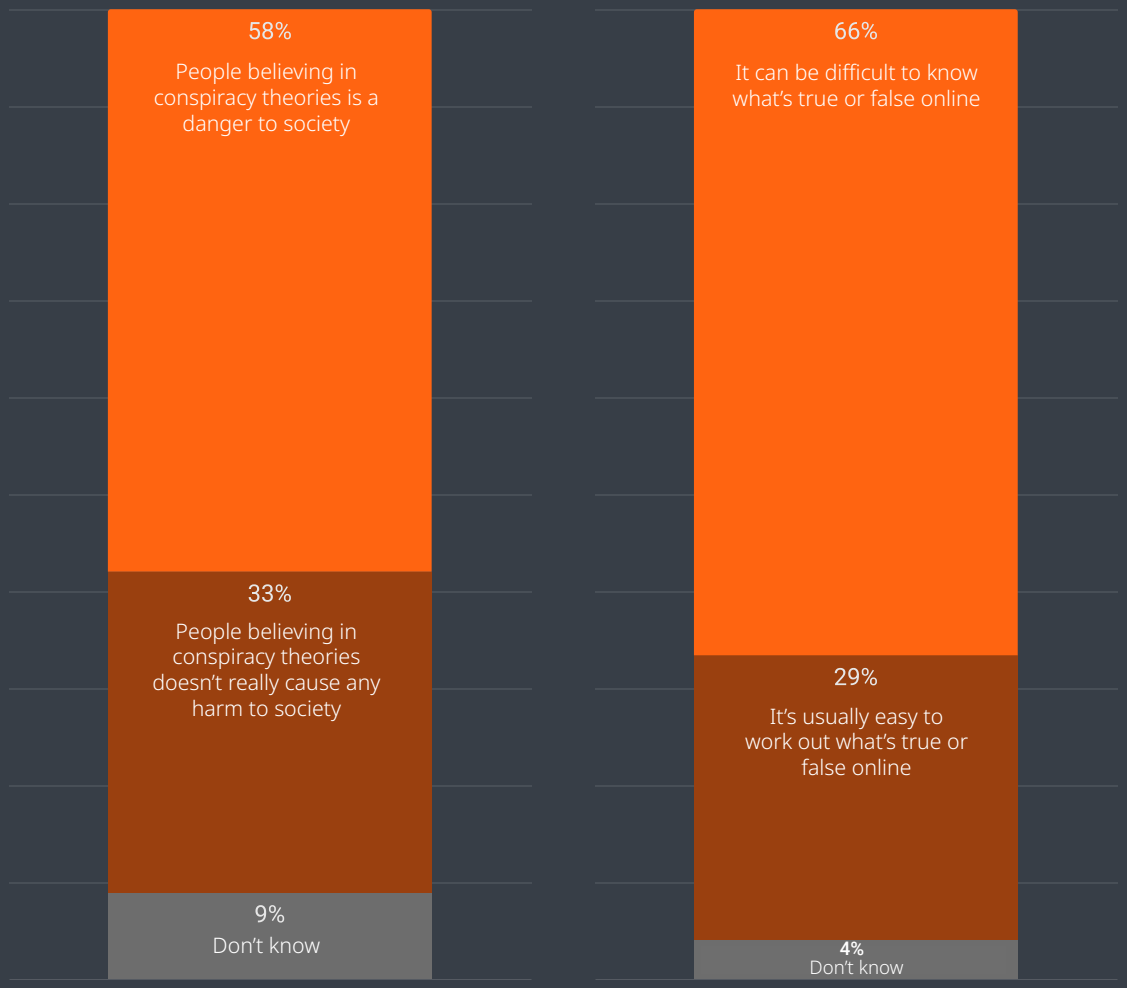
Year 10 Pupil,
Male, County Durham

"Because I feel like they [parents] wouldn't want to lie to you about stuff."

Year 10 Pupil,
Female, West Midlands

FINDING 4 - PARENTS PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

However, parents themselves are just as susceptible to online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation as young people. A plurality of parents (66%) agreed that it can be difficult to tell what is true and false online. 54% of parents believed that a conspiracy theory can be true.



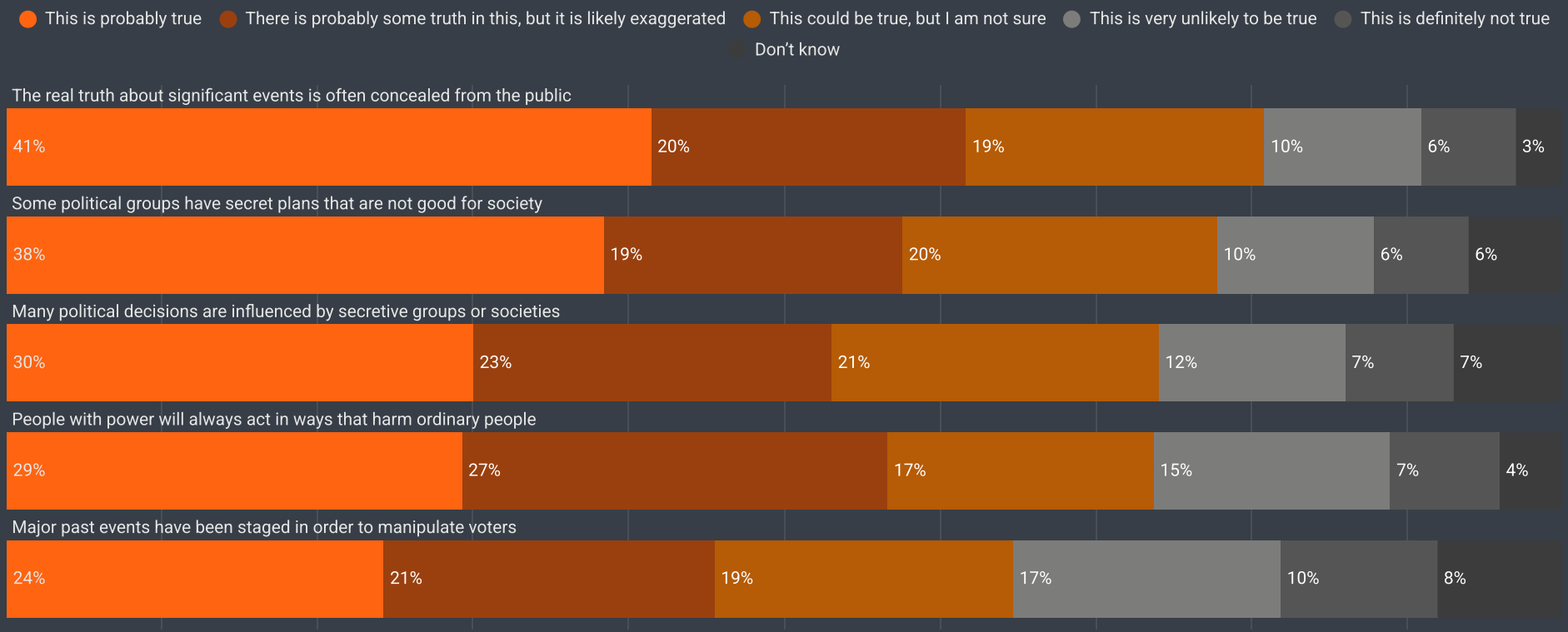
Graph 7: Which of the following comes closest to your view? [parents]

FINDING 4 - PARENTS PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

Parents' vulnerability to online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation also plays out in their specific beliefs about this content. In particular, parents were likely to say they believed in many of the narratives that underpin conspiracy beliefs. 41% of parents believed it is probably true that the real truth about significant events is often concealed from the public and 20% believed that there is probably some truth in this, but it is likely exaggerated.

The study also found evidence to suggest that parents from lower socioeconomic grades could be more susceptible to conspiracy thinking. Parents from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (DE) are more likely than those from the most affluent backgrounds (AB) to believe that 'people with power will always act in ways that harm ordinary people' (61% vs. 51%) and marginally more likely to believe that 'the real truth about significant events is often concealed from the public' (48% vs. 40%). Gender differences are smaller overall, though fathers are somewhat more likely than mothers to believe that 'many political decisions are influenced by secretive groups or societies' - around one in three versus one in four.

These findings are consistent with wider evidence showing a link between economic insecurity and distrust in institutions, which has been associated with greater receptiveness to belief in conspiracy theories.[5]

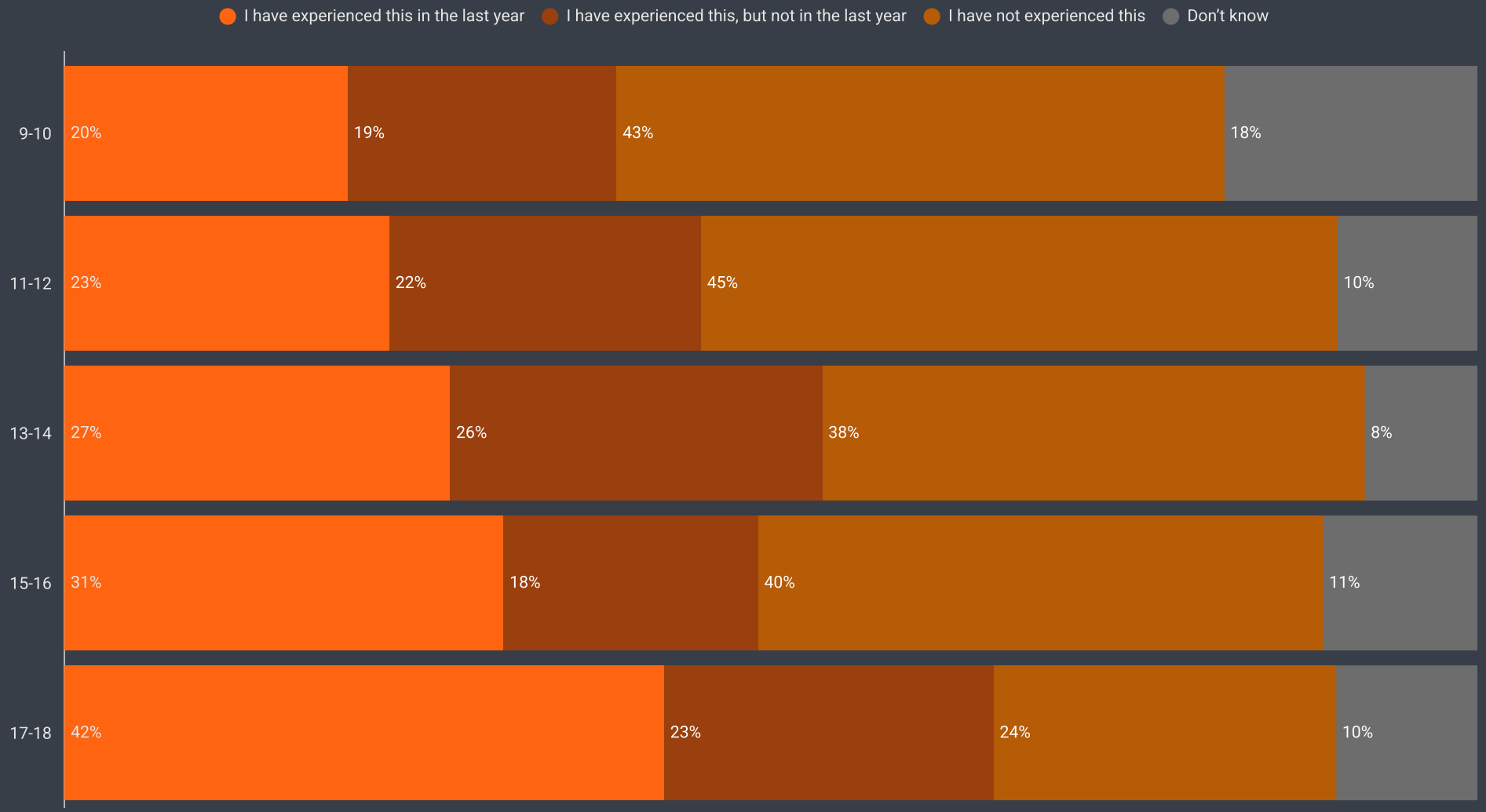


Graph 8: Looking at the following statements, how likely do you think it is that these are true? [parents]

5 van Prooijen, J.-W., Spadaro, G., & Wang, H. (2022). Suspicion of institutions: How distrust and conspiracy theories deteriorate social relationships. Current Opinion in Psychology, 43, 65–69. Accessed: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X21000828?

FINDING 4 - PARENTS PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

Significantly, parental susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, misinformation and disinformation had a clear impact on children and young people. 50% of young people had experienced a parent believing something they had read online that was untrue. This was particularly acute amongst older pupils with 65% of 17-18-year-olds having experienced a parent believing something they read online that was untrue, in comparison to 39% of 9-10-year-olds.



Graph 9: Which of the following, if any, have you personally experienced in the last year?: A parent or carer believing something they read online that was untrue [9-18-year-old pupils]

FINDING 4 - PARENTS PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

In our qualitative research, young people spoke about the tension between their trust in parents and their experience of parents' fallibility when accessing online content. Often, this was tied to a belief parents were not digital natives and therefore had less experience in navigating the online world than young people. This was not raised as a critique but as an acknowledgement of the reality of intergenerational differences in technology access.

"My mum is probably the most gullible person I know. If she saw a video, to be honest, I don't think she could tell the difference between AI and what's real. For example, she showed me a video of something, and I don't know how she believed it was true because it was obvious that it was AI."

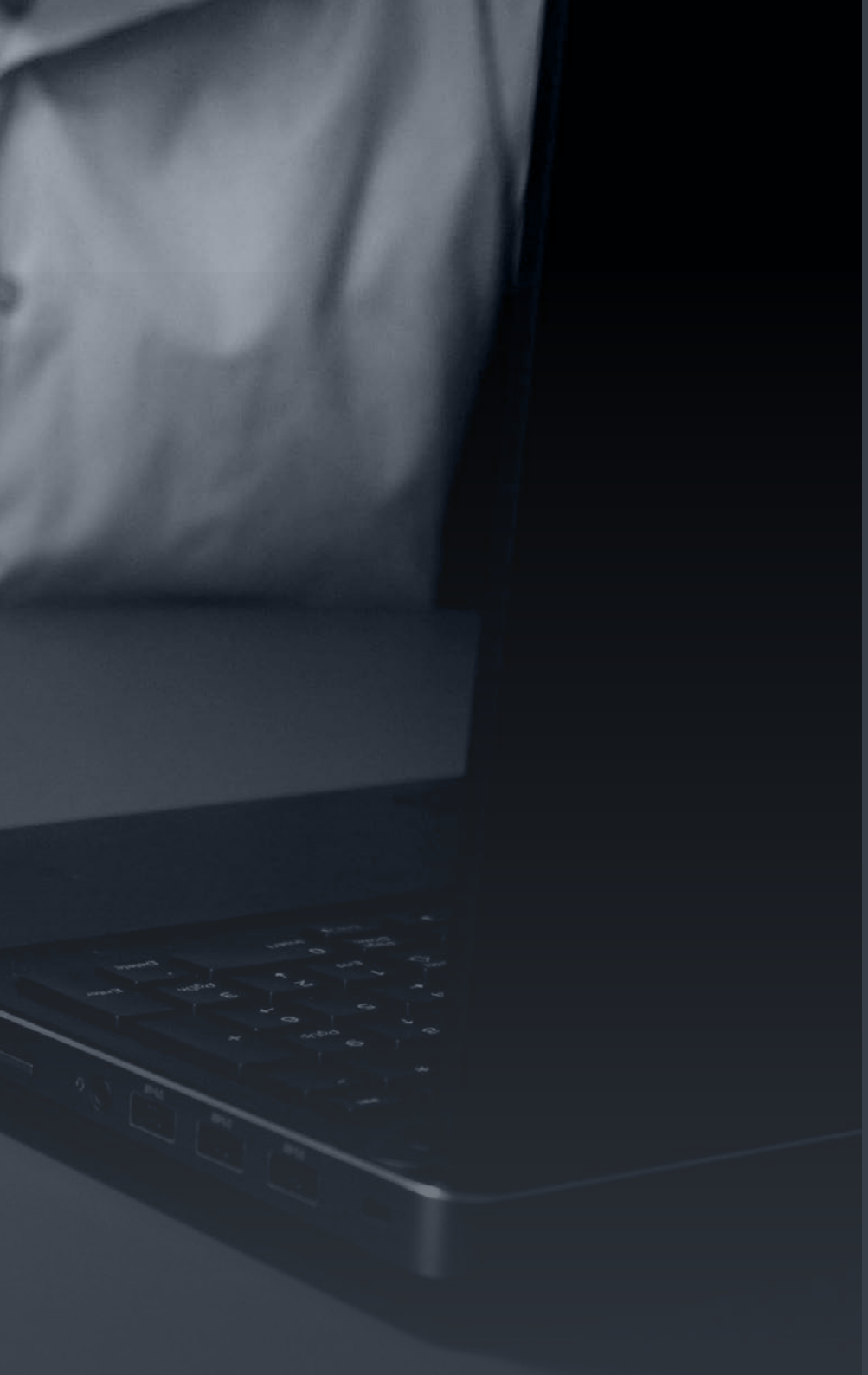
Year 10 Pupil, Male, West Midlands

"Every time my mum and dad are on YouTube they believe it's true. That's like a default for older people."

Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East

"Parents could be seeing the same fake stuff as I am. It's not like they work for the news and they know what's going on, they will just be the same as me. They could just be watching the same stuff as what I am"

Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East



FINDING 4 - PARENTS PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

> **"My parents could be getting some information off Facebook, and it might not be true. So they could be telling me something which they think is true but isn't."**
>
> *Year 10 Pupil, Male, West Midlands*

Teachers are acutely aware of the influence of parents in how children and young people are accessing and understanding online content. Many recall specific incidents whereby they perceived that parents had compounded issues around misinformation amongst young people, and where parents had actively undermined their efforts to educate and support young people.

> **"It [misinformation] could be something that the parents are talking to them about…especially some of the stuff we've seen in the news recently about the hotels [for asylum seekers], and the protests outside the hotels…this has bled into the classroom."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, West Midlands*

TEACHERS FEEL THAT PARENTS BOTH COMPOUND THE CHALLENGES OF, AND COMPLICATE THEIR ABILITY TO ADDRESS, ONLINE CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

SUMMARY

- Teachers saw parents as ill-equipped to tackle misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief with their children.
- Some parents were seen as actively unhelpful, sharing or reinforcing this type of content with their children.
- In the worst examples, parents were talked about as obstructing schools' efforts to support and educate in this space – and that this was becoming more of a problem.
- Teachers and school leaders reported concerns about parental complaints related to how misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief were addressed.

FINDING 5 - TEACHERS FEEL THAT PARENTS BOTH COMPOUND THE CHALLENGES OF, AND COMPLICATE THEIR ABILITY TO ADDRESS, ONLINE CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

Teachers are playing an active role in tackling the spread of online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation among children and young people, however, they report that parents are often compounding and complicating their ability to do so.

Rather than being partners to schools in supporting children and young people to navigate the online world, parents were seen, at best, as ill-equipped to address this problem with their children. This was often attributed to parental lack of confidence and training related to the ever-evolving social media landscape.

However, often parents were seen as an active part of the problem, as the source of the misinformation for their children, and as holding beliefs based on misinformation they had seen online.

> **"Some of the girls were going for their [HPV] jabs the other day. And one girl was walking slowly behind me, and she said, 'you do know, it causes autism, don't you?' And I looked her, and she said, 'my parents said I'm not having a jab, because this is what makes people autistic'. And I was thinking that her parents have told her that and I'm not going to start arguing with a student because I'm nervous."**
>
> *Middle Leader, Secondary, Female, East of England*

Teachers recalled incidents where specific conspiracy beliefs had been raised in their classrooms, but they had felt inhibited to address them. This inaction was often tied to the fear of potential backlash from parents who teachers perceived to be actively reinforcing this type of content at home with their children. Sometimes, teachers didn't want to feel like they were undermining or contradicting the parent; sometimes, they simply feared that addressing misinformation with their child would lead to a complaint from a parent.

> **"If it's their parents' views, you don't want to contradict a parent, but you might just feel that something is wrong, but it's hard."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Primary, Female, East of England*

FINDING 5 - TEACHERS FEEL THAT PARENTS BOTH COMPOUND THE CHALLENGES OF, AND COMPLICATE THEIR ABILITY TO ADDRESS, ONLINE CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

There was also a clear sense that schools wanted more support from parents to tackle this issue, but they were unclear about how to achieve this. Some school leaders suggested it was down to a lack of interest from parents – others a misplaced belief that their children were able to navigate the online world without their help or that it wasn't an issue impacting them.

> **"We'd need more backing from the parents. The police help us. We have the police come in once a term to do a lot of online safety, and that's good, but if we could call the parents, that'd help us."**

Senior Leader, Primary, Female, West Midlands

For many, the success of countering conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation was often contingent on the strength of the relationship and connection between parents and their child's teacher.

> **"You [teachers] have got to have the support from the parents, because if you're trying to tackle something as a school or as a teacher, and you're telling the children that this is right and this is wrong, if they go home and their parents are telling them that "that's completely wrong and I know that the teacher is not right", they [parents] are not going to believe you anyway and they are not going to listen to you. So you [teachers] need that support and backing from parents, which it seems year on year, that [support] is getting less and less."**

Classroom Teacher, Primary, Male, West Midlands

The ability to engage with parents on this issue was seen as part of a wider breakdown of the social contract between schools and families – albeit an area of particular and growing friction.

FINDING 6

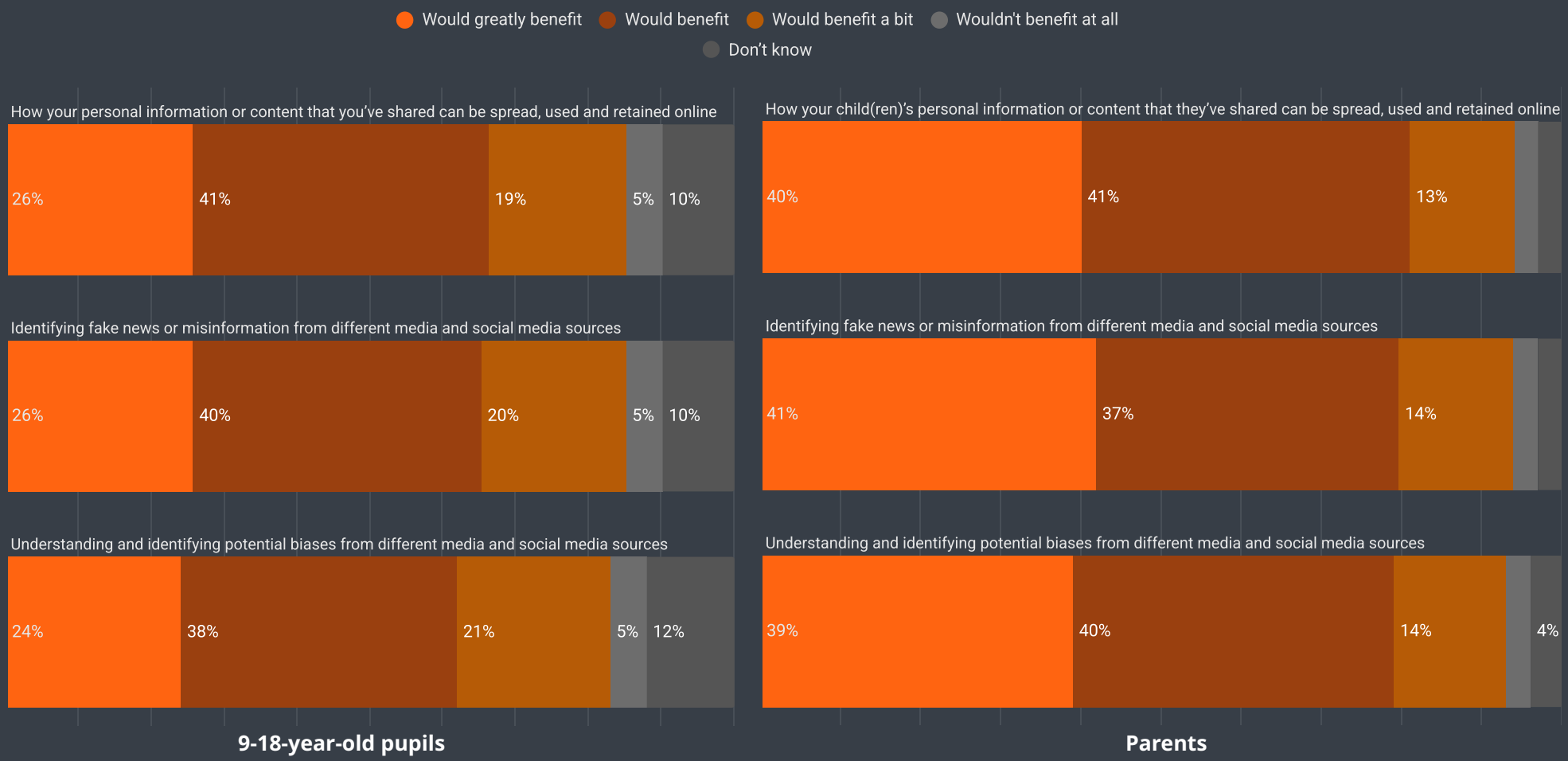
TEACHERS, PARENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE ALL SUPPORT THE INTRODUCTION OF MEDIA LITERACY INTO THE CURRICULUM

SUMMARY

- Both young people and parents are supportive of media literacy being embedded into the curriculum.
- Parents place trust in schools to tackle the issues of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories amongst young people.
- The majority of teachers support integrating media literacy and critical thinking into the curriculum.

FINDING 6 - TEACHERS, PARENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE ALL SUPPORT THE INTRODUCTION OF MEDIA LITERACY INTO THE CURRICULUM

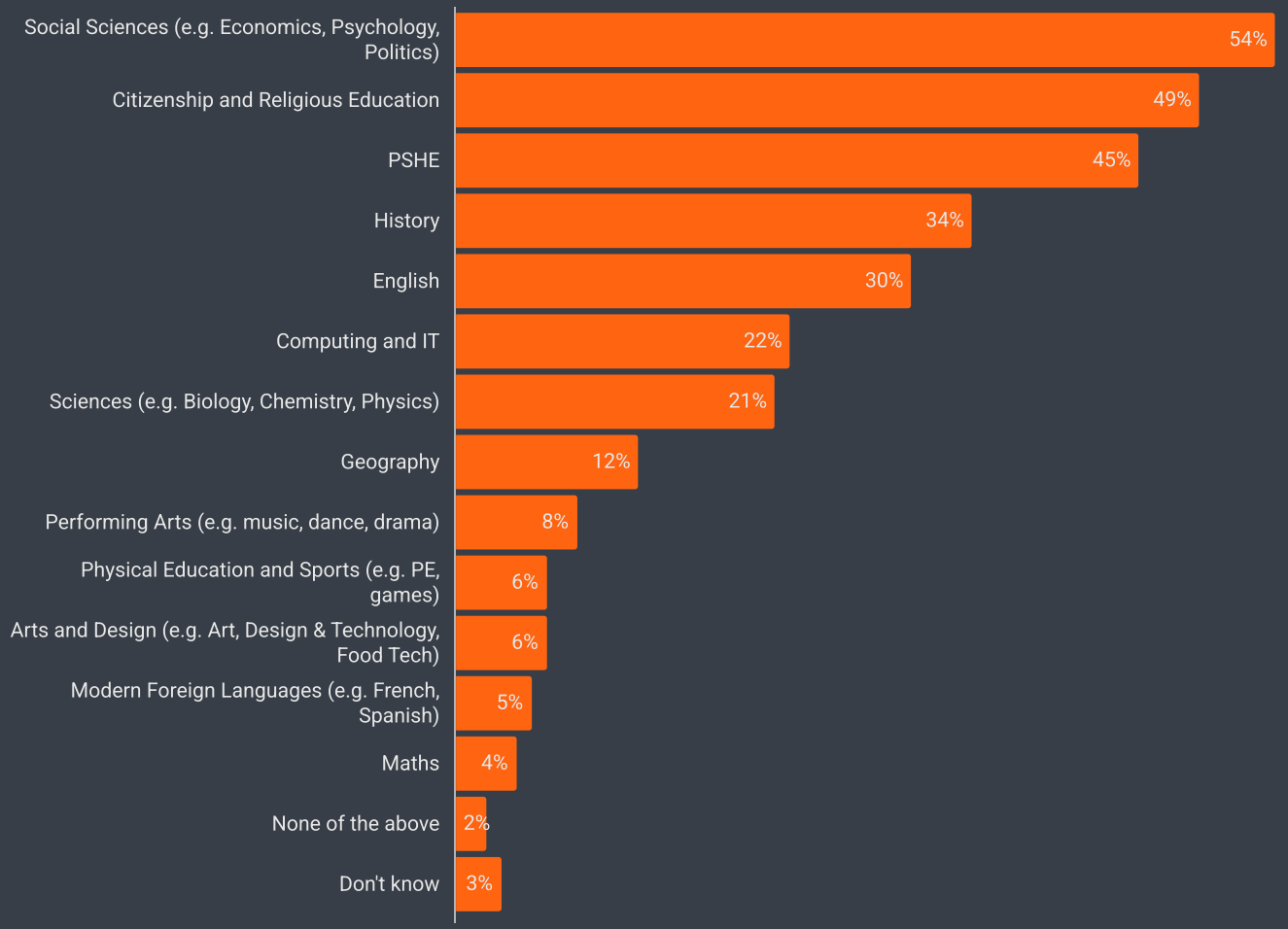
There is significant demand for media literacy to be embedded in the curriculum from both young people and parents. 86% of pupils and 92% of parents are supportive of education in the curriculum around identifying fake news or misinformation from different media and social media sources. Despite the challenges that teachers report around parental engagement and influence in this space, 76% of parents feel confident they would be able to get their child's school to take action to prevent further incidents if a child at school was spreading offensive false information.



Graph 10: To what extent do you think [you / your children] would benefit from learning more about the following?

FINDING 6 - TEACHERS, PARENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE ALL SUPPORT THE INTRODUCTION OF MEDIA LITERACY INTO THE CURRICULUM

When asked in which subjects education around conspiracy theories and misinformation should sit, school staff were most likely to suggest social sciences (including economics, psychology and politics) (54%), followed by citizenship and RE (49%), PSHE (45%), history (34%) and English (30%). School staff were least likely to suggest modern foreign languages (5%) and – perhaps surprisingly given the use of statistics in spreading misinformation - maths (4%).



Graph 11: If education around conspiracy theories and misinformation were added to the curriculum, which subjects should it be integrated into? Select any which apply [school staff]

"I just don't think there's enough [media literacy teaching] for the amount of media that's out there nowadays. I don't think we're taught it enough for the amount of media that gets put in our brains."

Year 10 Pupil,
Male, North East

"I don't know how we are ever going to get to a point where these kids are going to be able to reflect and see whether something is real or not, I think a large part of that has to be with a modernised curriculum..."

Classroom Teacher,
Secondary, Female, West Midlands

HOWEVER, SCHOOL STAFF CONTINUE TO FEEL ILL-EQUIPPED, UNDER-RESOURCED AND NERVOUS IN TACKLING ONLINE CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION... AND THIS IS PARTICULARLY SO AMONGST PRIMARY STAFF

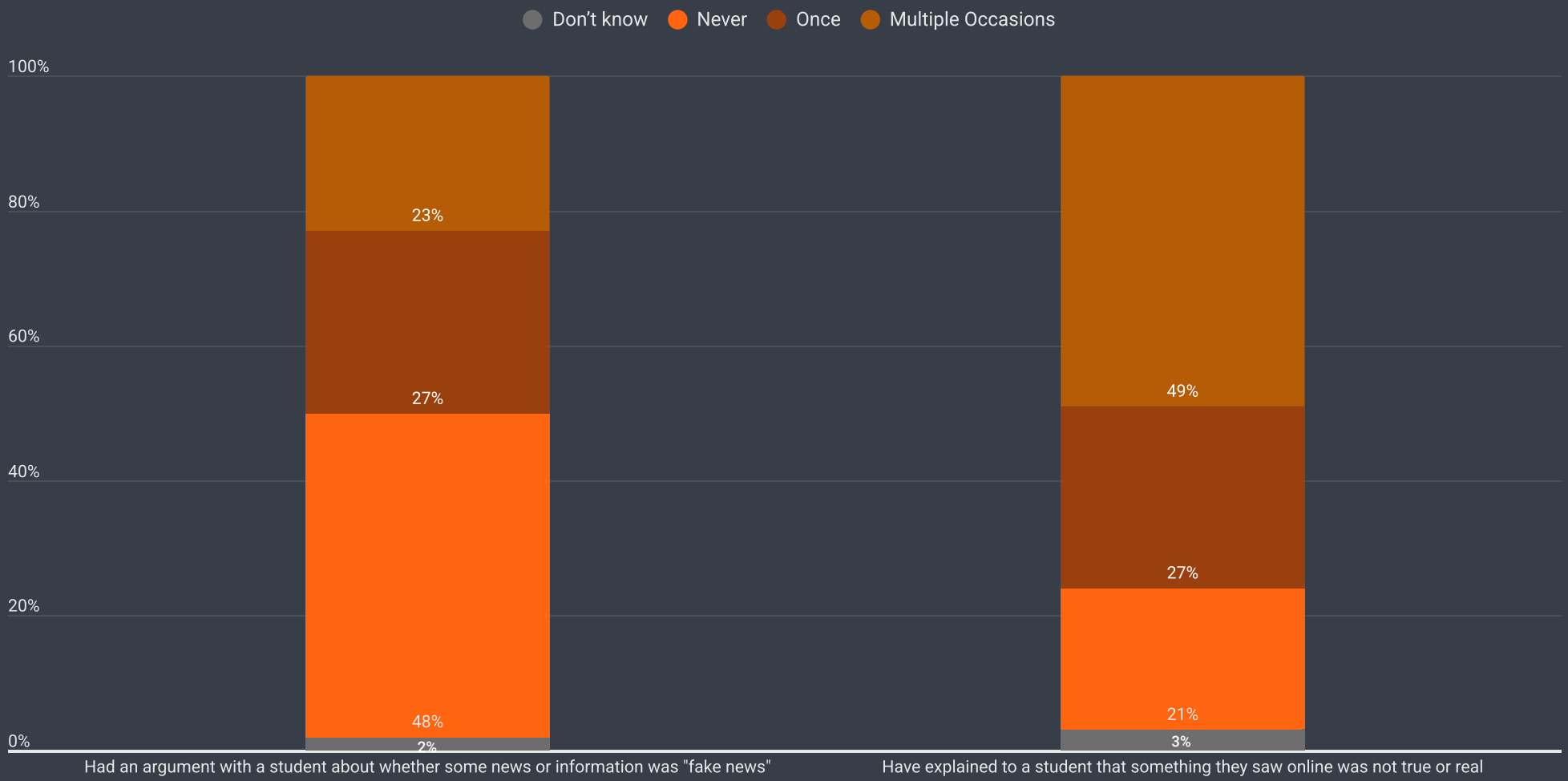
SUMMARY

- Around one in two teachers have explained to a student on multiple occasions that something they saw online was not true or real.
- However, many of these interactions between school staff and young people are adversarial.
- Despite the frequency in which school staff are addressing misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief amongst young people, they receive little or no training to do so.

FINDING 7 - HOWEVER, SCHOOL STAFF CONTINUE TO FEEL ILL-EQUIPPED, UNDER-RESOURCED AND NERVOUS IN TACKLING ONLINE CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION... AND THIS IS PARTICULARLY SO AMONGST PRIMARY STAFF

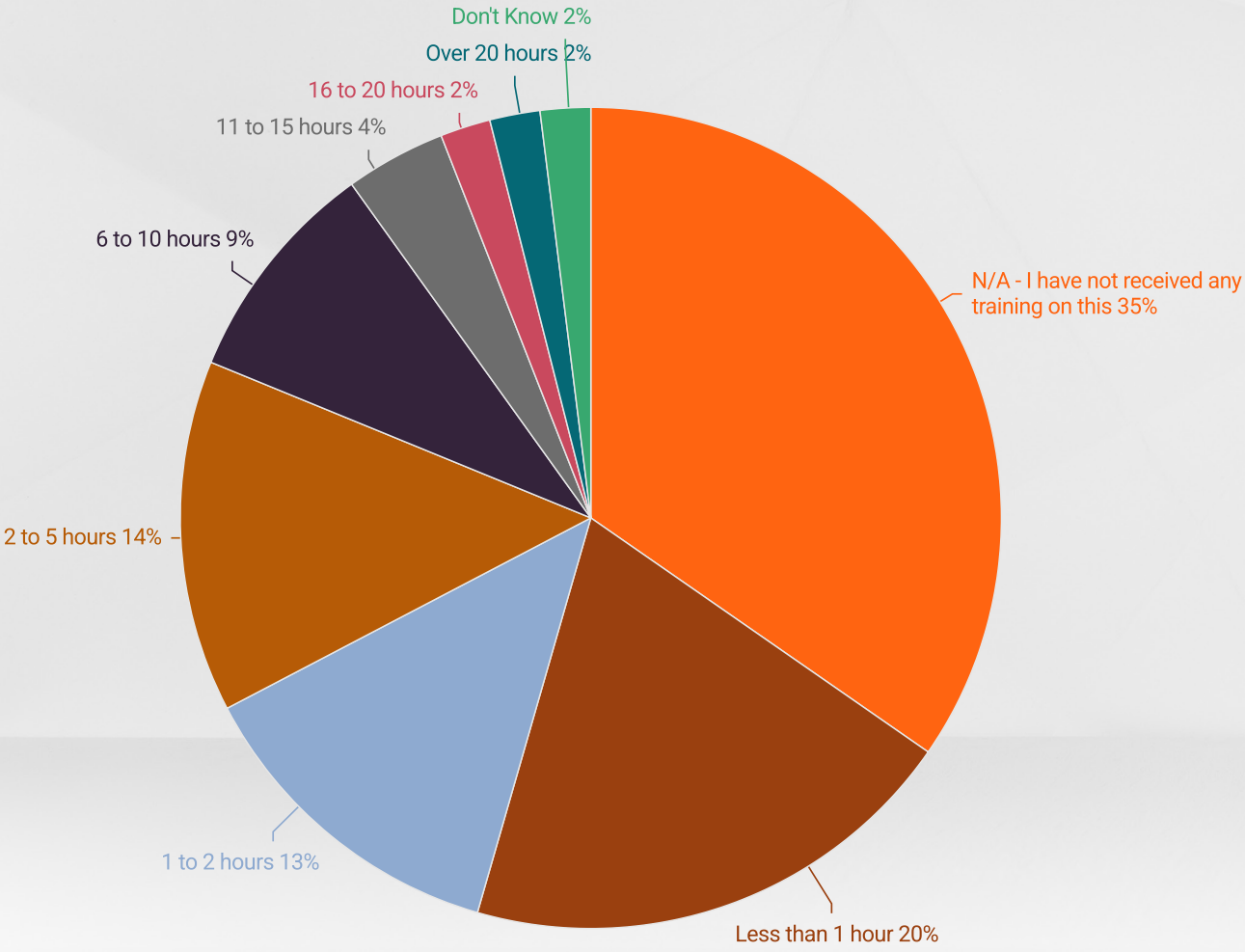
Teachers are regularly addressing misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief amongst children and young people. 34% of teachers had experienced a pupil spreading false information during a lesson in the month before taking our survey, roughly equal to the number who reported the same in phase one of the research (33%). 77% of school staff told us that they have explained to a pupil that something they saw online was not true or real, with 50% of school staff having done so on multiple occasions.

However, this appears to be creating adversarial interactions between young people and school staff. 51% of school staff reported having had an argument with a student over whether news or information they saw online was real, with 23% saying this had happened on multiple occasions.



Graph 12: Percentage of school staff who have done the following:

This may be a result of the lack of training that school staff have received to address conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst young people. 35% of all school staff have not received any training on tackling online conspiracies – this rises to 51% for primary school staff. Moreover, where school staff report having received training, most report having received very little with 54% of school staff having received less than an hour of training.



Graph 13: How many hours of training have you received on how to respond to students who bring up false information or conspiracy theories in the classroom? [school staff]

"I always feel like the children [are] a little bit ahead of us, and we kind of find out after it's already happened. Whereas ideally, you'd like to preempt a lot of it, but because we're not on TikTok all day, we're not in that world."

Senior Leader,
Primary, Female, West Midlands

FINDING 8

THE INCLUSION OF MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY BELIEF WITHIN KCSIE HAS INCREASED AWARENESS OF TEACHERS BUT IT HAS NOT IMPROVED CONFIDENCE IN ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

SUMMARY

- Teachers were supportive of including misinformation response training in safeguarding training.
- Teachers consistently observed that the updated Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance was discussed in school INSET days at the start of term in September 2025.
- However, this increased awareness did not track through to confidence from teachers in addressing the challenges of misinformation.

FINDING 8 - THE INCLUSION OF MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY BELIEF WITHIN KCSIE HAS INCREASED AWARENESS OF TEACHERS BUT IT HAS NOT IMPROVED CONFIDENCE IN ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

School staff identified updating safeguarding policies and training as one of the key measures that would improve teacher confidence in addressing rising misinformation in the classroom, with 74% of teachers supporting the inclusion of misinformation response training in safeguarding policies and training.

This focus on safeguarding policies and training, along with CPD, was the policy change that school staff were most likely to say made them more confident in addressing misinformation and disinformation with children and young people. It ranked above new guidance or best practice resources (71%), embedding misinformation training in early career and trainee teacher programmes (70%) and integrating media literacy into the curriculum (60%).

Graph 14: Percentage of school staff who believe each action would make them more confident responding to pupils who bring up conspiracy theories in the classroom

FINDING 8 - THE INCLUSION OF MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY BELIEF WITHIN KCSIE HAS INCREASED AWARENESS OF TEACHERS BUT IT HAS NOT IMPROVED CONFIDENCE IN ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

In September 2025, the Department for Education updated the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance to include 'conspiracy belief', 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' as safeguarding terms.[6] In the focus groups we ran with teachers after this updated guidance was published, they were able to identify the updated changes with many having this signposted to them on INSET days at the start of term.

> **"So we had all this is in the updates to the Keeping Children Safe in Education [guidance] this year."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Primary, Female, East of England*

Whilst some degree of trepidation might be a healthy sign of the serious and considered way in which school staff are treating this challenge, it is notable that the updated guidance did not necessarily translate to increased confidence in tackling conspiracy beliefs, misinformation and disinformation in the classroom. Many teachers were even apathetic about the impact of such updated guidance on their ability to manage complex real-life situations in the classroom.

> **"We were shown the changes [to the guidance] in a staff meeting at the start of the year before the children were in [school] but in terms of impact within the classroom, there's not been a specific change that I could say or pinpoint."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Primary, Male, West Midlands*

> **"At my school, we were given a copy of the document [updated guidance] when we returned back [to school] in September… and all of the changes were highlighted to us."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, West Midlands*

> **"Yeah, we had to do some training on that. But it was only literally one of those little online training things, watch the videos, answer the questions."**
>
> *Middle Leader, Secondary, Female, East of England*

6 Department for Education (2025). Keeping children safe in education 2025: Statutory guidance for schools and colleges. P.38. Accessed: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68add931969253904d155860/Keeping_children_safe_in_education_from_1_September_2025.pdf

FINDING 9

THE LACK OF CLARITY WITHIN POLITICAL IMPARTIALITY GUIDANCE IS INHIBITING TEACHERS' ABILITY TO ADDRESS CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

SUMMARY

- There was significant confusion over how political impartiality guidance should be interpreted.
- Some teachers raised concerns about how political impartiality made it difficult for them to address some of the more political types of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief with young people.

FINDING 9 - THE LACK OF CLARITY WITHIN POLITICAL IMPARTIALITY GUIDANCE IS INHIBITING TEACHERS' ABILITY TO ADDRESS CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Political impartiality guidance was a cause of confusion amongst teachers, who frequently suggested that it created an environment in which they were concerned that they may be 'breaking the rules', but did not offer any meaningful or practical direction.

For many, it was linked to a fear that if they made a mistake in addressing misinformation amongst young people, they would be blamed for doing so, particularly by parents.

> **"No matter how much you prepare for any discussion on a topic that can be quite controversial, there's always going to be one kid in there... and really put you on the spot, and no amount of prep for that [will help]... there's too many examples of where a teacher has tried to do something right and ended up expressing an opinion that a kid has taken the wrong way and reported to parents, and suddenly you get that email saying the Headteacher would like a meeting with you... So even with this guidance, the fact is...we're very rarely given the actual briefings and support."**
>
> *Senior Leader, Secondary, Male, West Midlands*

> **"I think teaching staff are very apprehensive, because if there is a conversation...it seems to be more and more [common], especially in my school, that you'll get parents challenge guidance, and you'll get complaints made against things that have been said. So I think teachers are probably apprehensive to kind of challenge things, or follow guidance, because there always seems to be loopholes."**
>
> *Senior Leader, Secondary, Female, West Midlands*

FINDING 9 - THE LACK OF CLARITY WITHIN POLITICAL IMPARTIALITY GUIDANCE IS INHIBITING TEACHERS' ABILITY TO ADDRESS CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Very few of the teachers within the qualitative research could tell us specifically what the guidance said, but rather that it made them feel concerned to act in areas they perceived to be political.

> **"I don't have enough of the information myself, especially if it's something that I've not heard about so sometimes I can be a bit anxious [in case I address it wrongly]. I've had it with Gaza-Palestine as well, where I'm on the spot and I'm just like 'Oh God, I don't know what I'm supposed to say'."**
>
> *Senior Leaders, Primary, Female, West Midlands*

> **"We can't be political and we can't be espousing what we believe to the children necessarily…goes back to what we were saying earlier about the jabs and you can't be saying 'well I think that's nonsense because there is scientific evidence for this' but that's as much about not upsetting parents and getting yourself in hot water with management because you said something that you don't want to say…we are walking that fine."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Primary, Male, East of England*

When the wording of the guidance was shared with them, teachers were concerned about the utility of the guidance in a live situation in a classroom – this was sometimes linked to the plethora of guidance that teachers must follow.

> **"We have so many different [types of] guidance and so many different things that we have to do."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, East of England*

FINDING 10

YOUTH WORKERS RECOGNISE THAT CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IS AN ISSUE AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE, ALTHOUGH THEY SEE THIS IN THE CONTEXT OF WIDER SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

SUMMARY

- Youth workers were concerned about the impact of the online world on the young people they worked with.

- Despite this, the issue of online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation did not rank as high in significance as some of the societal issues youth workers are confronting – crime, poverty and a lack of opportunities facing young people.

FINDING 10 - YOUTH WORKERS RECOGNISE THAT CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IS AN ISSUE AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE, ALTHOUGH THEY SEE THIS IN THE CONTEXT OF WIDER SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

The Commission's original research demonstrated the need to understand the role of the wider community and organisations who work with young people, specifically the role of youth workers. We conducted qualitative research with the youth sector in order to better understand how misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief manifest in this space, and how it was being addressed.[7]

Largely, we found that youth workers and leaders in the sector were aware of the challenges that came with the online world – including rising online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation. Youth workers recounted frequent conversations with the young people they supported around online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation.

> **"Yeah, loads of misinformation. Sometimes I have young people say something to me, and "I'm like, where did you hear that from?" And they're like 'yeah, TikTok'."**
>
> *Youth Worker, Female, London*

> **"So maybe there is misinformation that you're safer if you carry a knife, but statistics show you that you're more likely to have that used against you."**
>
> *Youth Worker, Female, London*

7 We conducted two focus groups with youth workers from the North West and London and a roundtable with leaders from youth sector organisations to unpick how issues around online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation were arising in their interactions with young people.

FINDING 10 - YOUTH WORKERS RECOGNISE THAT CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IS AN ISSUE AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE, ALTHOUGH THEY SEE THIS IN THE CONTEXT OF WIDER SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

They also noted that this often had a real impact on the behaviour of young people – with young people becoming increasingly polarised in their beliefs around certain issues when confronted. There was also concern that young people's critical thinking skills were declining. Several youth workers highlighted their belief that young people are increasingly believing what they see on TikTok – and that this included a significant amount of content which was not true or accurate.

> **"Young people will talk to me as if they know what's happening and they're right, and it's misconstrued, it's misinformation, and based on what they might have seen on Facebook or what someone else has sent."**
>
> *Youth Worker, Female, North West*

Youth workers were generally supportive of additional training and up-to-date resources to help them feel more equipped to counter these beliefs and support young people to fact check this information.

> **"Something that could help would be to get more clarity on the information itself, really, and how we could prove [to a young person] that it is false information."**
>
> *Youth Worker, Male, North West*

> **"Youth workers need a big toolbox of interventions to respond quickly to whatever the young person's talking about."**
>
> *Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, East of England*

However, they did not see fake news as one of the key issues facing the particularly vulnerable young people that they support. When asked, youth workers cited crime, complex safeguarding, children missing from home, poverty and a lack of education and employment opportunities as their most pressing concerns. They did not necessarily recognise the intersection of misinformation and these wider societal challenges.

> **"I work with a lot of children that can't even afford a phone, and so, social media isn't even part of their world. A lot of their world is the community they grew up in, it's expectations that they are part of this gang and part of this postcode."**
>
> *Youth Worker, Female, North West*

IMPACT INDEX

The Commission's first report set out 11 recommendations for how policymakers, schools and wider communities could address the challenges of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief amongst young people. Over the last year, the Commission has been committed to implementing these recommendations.

Below, we set out the progress that has been made on the delivery of each of these recommendations over the past 12 months.

RECOMMENDATION	PROGRESS
1 POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED FROM THE DFE, OFSTED, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUSTS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO SIGNAL TO SCHOOL LEADERS AND SCHOOL STAFF THAT THEY CAN AND SHOULD BE ADDRESSING CONSPIRACY BELIEF WITHOUT FEAR OF REPRISAL.	During the Commission's lifetime, concerns about online misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief in schools have risen significantly up the political agenda. The Commission has been regularly consulted by officials across multiple Government teams and departments. In September 2025, the Department for Education adopted the Commission's recommendation and updated its safeguarding guidance, *Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)*, to include references to conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation for the first time. The Commission's research has also informed wider policy development. The independent Curriculum and Assessment Review cited the Commission's research in calling for children to gain vital skills to identify fake news, misinformation and disinformation. Ministers have engaged directly with the Commission's work. In February 2026, Josh MacAlister MP, Minister for Children and Families, joined a Commission-led fact-finding visit to Estonia to explore international best practice.
2 TEACHERS MUST BE SUPPORTED TO DEBUNK CONSPIRACIES WITH REGULARLY UPDATED RESOURCES AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDES.	In response to the recommendations, Pears Foundation has funded the National Institute of Teaching (NIOT) to establish the Centre for Digital Information Literacy in Schools (CDILS). This initiative will embed digital media literacy across teacher education and professional development, including training, leadership qualifications, online modules and classroom resources. Pears Foundation has also funded UCL's Institute of Education (IOE) to deliver teacher training focused on responding to conspiracy theories and online misinformation. This includes piloted CPD, a national rollout, and the development of classroom materials to support critical thinking.
3 EXPERT-LED, RESEARCH-INFORMED AND SUSTAINED CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD) MUST BE MADE AVAILABLE FOR SCHOOL STAFF AND LEADERS.	The Commission's second year of research has strengthened the evidence base on professional development, providing new insights into the training and support school staff need to feel confident addressing misinformation and disinformation. The Pears-funded programmes at the NIOT and IOE will be expert-led and informed by extensive research including piloting, interviews and randomised controlled trials.

RECOMMENDATION	PROGRESS
4 TRAINING ON ADDRESSING CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION SHOULD BE EMBEDDED INTO TRAINING FOR EARLY CAREER AND TRAINEE TEACHERS.	Both CDILS and the IOE are working to embed critical thinking, psychological insight and media literacy across teacher development including working with trainee and early career teachers.
5 EDUCATION ON CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION SHOULD BEGIN IN PRIMARY SCHOOL, WHERE CHILDREN'S TRUST IN ADULTS IS GENERALLY STILL HIGH.	In its response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Government accepted the recommendation - informed by the Commission's first report - to introduce media literacy in the primary curriculum. CDILS and the IOE are developing resources for primary and secondary teachers. The Commission has also committed to ensuring primary-aged pupils, primary school staff and parents of primary-aged young people are represented in its ongoing research. Children in years 5 and 6 were included in the 2026 research.
6 MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICALITY SHOULD BE EMBEDDED IN THE CURRICULUM. THIS SHOULD BE INTEGRATED ACROSS THE CURRICULUM, INCLUDING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE, HISTORY, RS, CITIZENSHIP, SCIENCE, COMPUTER SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS.	The Government agreed to implement the recommendations of the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review on a new statutory requirement for primary level citizenship teaching, as well as updating and embedding content on media literacy in Key Stage 3 and 4 across English, Citizenship, RSHE and Computing. The new curriculum is expected to be rolled out from 2028.

RECOMMENDATION	PROGRESS
7 THERE NEEDS TO BE A WHOLE COMMUNITY APPROACH TO ADDRESSING CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN SCHOOLS.	The Commission engages a wide range of stakeholders and regularly presents at sector conferences to raise awareness and support policymakers addressing misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief across society.
8 SPECIFIC TRAINING ON CONSPIRACY THEORIES, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION SHOULD BE EMBEDDED INTO THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR ALLIED AND ANCILLARY STAFF, PARTICULARLY YOUTH WORKERS.	The Commission has expanded its research into the youth sector, convening a roundtable with youth leaders and conducting focus groups with youth workers to better understand how these issues manifest beyond schools and how they can be addressed collaboratively.
9 SPECIFIC TRAINING ON CONSPIRACY THEORIES, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN SAFEGUARDING TRAINING AND PROCESSES.	The September 2025 update to *Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)* included explicit references to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief for the first time, embedding these issues within safeguarding frameworks.

RECOMMENDATION	PROGRESS
10 MORE RESEARCH SHOULD BE UNDERTAKEN TO UNDERSTAND HOW PARENTS AND FAMILIES CAN BE SUPPORTED TO ADDRESS CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AT HOME.	In 2026, the Commission will undertake dedicated research to better understand how schools can engage with parents to support young people in navigating misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy content online.
11 MORE RESEARCH NEEDS TO BE UNDERTAKEN INTO HOW CONSPIRACY BELIEF, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION PRESENTS AND IMPACTS SPECIFIC GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE, INCLUDING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND.	The Commission has paid close attention to recent policy changes affecting children with SEND. In summer 2025, it convened a roundtable to explore how misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief are experienced by pupils with SEND.

METHODOLOGY

In its second year, the Commission built on the existing evidence base from our 2025 research. We undertook both qualitative and quantitative research with students, school staff, parents and youth workers to track how each group understands the problem of conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation, and how they thought it should be tackled.

YOUNG PEOPLE

We undertook an anonymous, online survey targeting 2,075 young people in full-time education, aged 9 to 18, from 15th - 26th of July 2025.

The young people who participated in this research were between the ages of 9 and 18 and across primary (Year 5 and 6), secondary (Year 7-11) post-16 education (Year 12 and 13). On the basis of our first year of research, we have widened the age of those polled to include those in primary school. For ethical reasons, primary school-aged pupils were not asked every question within the survey. We have been clear throughout this report about the age range of each question sample, where relevant.

In addition, we undertook a series of four focus groups with young people in different secondary schools across England. These groups were undertaken between December 2025 and January 2026. Each group was undertaken in person at the students' schools during the school day, facilitated by two trained Public First researchers. All focus groups were undertaken in a semi-structured format, with key discussion questions and flexibility for the discussion to be led by young people. Student participants were identified through their schools, with a lead teacher supporting Public First facilitators to arrange the groups. All pupils were in Year 10. Socioeconomic status, prior attainment and ethnicity reflected school intake. Two of the groups were single-sex groups.

	LOCATION	GENDER	FSM	ETHNICITY	YEAR
School A	County Durham	Boys	Mixed	Representative of school intake	10
School A	County Durham	Girls	Mixed		10
School B	West Midlands	Mixed	FSM eligible		10
School B	West Midlands	Mixed	Non FSM eligible		10

PARENTS

We undertook an anonymous, online survey which encompassed 2,018 parents of young people in full-time education aged 9 to 18 from 8th – 22nd July 2025.

SCHOOL STAFF

We undertook an anonymous, online survey targeting 524 school staff in primary, secondary and post 16 education, from 4th July - 1st of August 2025.

Throughout the research carried out for this Commission, we have referred to 'school staff' rather than 'teachers'. This was a deliberate choice to cast the net more widely across schools to include all staff who work in schools, rather than just teaching staff. Although some of the challenges identified in this research doubtless manifest specifically within a classroom setting and are dealt with by teachers, conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation does not respect the walls of the classroom, and we felt it important to include all staff working in schools. This included (but is not limited to) teaching assistants, catering staff, school site and maintenance teams, IT support staff, cleaning staff and cover supervisors. Anyone who worked regularly in a school was identified as a potential research participant. Where 'teachers' were identified as a particular subgroup, they have been described as such.

We ran five independently recruited focus groups with classroom teachers and senior leaders within primary and secondary schools. They were also recruited to include mixed gender, ethnicity and geographic demographics. Participants were from state schools only. All the school staff focus groups were run online, facilitated by a Public First researcher. They were undertaken in a semi-structured format, with key discussion questions and flexibility for the discussion. These focus groups ran in November and December 2025.

	LOCATION	SENIORITY	PHASE	ETHNICITY	GENDER
Group 1	East of England	Classroom Teachers	Primary and secondary	Mixed	Mixed
Group 2	West Midlands	Classroom Teachers	Primary and secondary	Mixed	Mixed
Group 3	East of England	Middle leaders	Primary and secondary	Mixed	Mixed
Group 4	West Midlands	Senior leaders	Primary	Mixed	Mixed
Group 5	West Midlands	Senior leaders	Secondary	Mixed	Mixed

YOUTH WORKERS

We ran two independently recruited focus groups with youth workers in different settings. All youth workers focus groups were run online, facilitated by a Public First researcher. They were undertaken in a semi-structured format, with key discussion questions and flexibility for the discussion. These focus groups ran in December 2025.

	LOCATION	ETHNICITY	GENDER
Group 1	North West	Mixed	Mixed
Group 2	London	Mixed	Mixed

We also ran an online roundtable of leading organisations within the youth sector in November 2025. This included:

1. **Ndidi Okezie**, CEO, Business in the Community (Chair)
2. **Bridget Kohner**, Deputy Director, Pears Foundation
3. **Kayleigh Wainwright**, Head of Youth Strategy Engagement, Department for Culture, Media and Sport
4. **Rosie Ferguson OBE**, CEO of UK Youth
5. **Berenice Levenez**, Director Strategy, Technology & Transformation, Girlguiding
6. **Hilary Maywood**, Head of Youth Programme, The Scouts
7. **Rashid Iqbal**, CEO at The Winch
8. **Professor Lynn Davies**, Founder at Connect Futures
9. **Kwame Westerman**, CATCH Leeds

SOCIOECONOMIC GRADE

Throughout this research, we refer to different socioeconomic groups, as defined by the National Readership Survey's Social Grade system.[8] Social Grade is a classification system-based on occupation and is based on the main income earner in the household. The classifications are:

SOCIAL GRADE	DESCRIPTION	% OF POPULATION
A	Higher managerial, administrative and professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional	23
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional	28
C2	Skilled manual workers	20
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	15
E	State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only	10

POLLING

Public First is a member of the British Polling Council, and company partners of the Market Research Society. Public First adheres to the professional standards set out by these bodies, including our duty of transparency. Full polling tables for all three polls undertaken in this research are available on Public First's website.[9] As with all opinion polls, there is a margin of error in the answers, and the margin of error is greater when sample sizes are smaller (when there are cross-breaks of specific groups of people). For pupils and parents, the margin of error is +/-3%. For school staff, it is +/-4%. All polling numbers in this report should be read on this basis.

8 National Readership Survey. (2016). Social Grade. Accessed: https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/
9 Public First (2026). Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools. Accessed: www.publicfirst.co.uk

SAFEGUARDING AND ETHICAL RESEARCH

Inherent within the Commission were significant ethical considerations that had to be considered and navigated in order to ensure that the research did not cause harm to any individual or groups. Public First has broad experience of undertaking research with vulnerable groups and on politically sensitive and challenging issues, including with young people, individuals with special educational needs and minority groups.

The Commission, and its research partner Public First, are committed to the very highest standards of ethical conduct in our research, and we adhere to the professional standards set out by the Market Research Society and British Polling Council, of which we are members.[10] Specific attention was paid to ensuring that informed consent was given by all participants prior to taking part in the research, particularly the young people who took part, and their parents. Additional safeguarding measures were put in place with the schools who supported this project, and a named contact was provided for young people after each focus group so that any concerns could be addressed.

The identifying features of all participants have been anonymised to protect their privacy. This report uses so called 'thick description' - detailed observations of characteristics and context - to narrate and interpret what has been observed and discussed within a broader context, and provides analysis based upon the voices of participants. Their words remain unchanged. Public First's goal with this research was to explore how conspiracy theories are understood. We did not conduct this research in order to find out how widely held beliefs are, or to test how believable different theories would be. Instead, our questions and research focus on the perceptions of conspiracy theories, the downstream effects, and how educators can best respond. At all stages of the research, when specific examples of conspiracy theories were discussed, the research team made explicitly clear that these were widely discredited or had no factual basis.

10 British Polling Council: https://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/ ; Market Research Society: https://www.mrs.org.uk/

Pears Foundation

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