

Project hopes for generational change in attitudes and behaviour

West Lothian is pioneering a project in schools which aims to tackle the root causes of domestic assaults and gender-based violence in society.

The peer led project has senior high school pupils acting as mentors to those in younger years, putting mutual respect at the core of relationships.

In challenging traditional stereotypes and attitudes and behaviours the mentoring project is also facing down the burgeoning misogyny which boys and young men are bombarded with on social media.

And while the Mentoring in Violence Prevention (MVP) scheme has only been running for two years it has already brought wider improvements to behaviour in schools.

Many report an end to the “bystander” mentality, with pupils prepared to engage with senior pupils and staff to prevent fights and classroom violence.

The council’s Education Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel heard that all but two high schools have the Mentoring in Violence Prevention programme running.

Martin Berginis, the council’s Child Protection Officer told the PDSP: “We are one of very few local authorities in

Scotland to have rolled the programme out across all our secondaries.”

MVP is a peer education programme created jointly by Police Scotland’s Violence Reduction Unit and Education Scotland.

Mr Berginis added: “The programme seeks to improve pupil understanding of key issues related to gender-based violence such as healthy relationships, consent, gender equality and negative stereotypes.

“It empowers young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to make positive decisions about their own lives, to challenge harmful attitudes and beliefs and to safely intervene where a risk of physical or emotional harm may develop.”

Senior pupils undergo in-depth training to enable them to deliver a range of different MVP lessons to younger pupils within the school.

Mentors can select different issues in order to best meet the needs of the pupils and the wider school. Senior mentors also become a trusted point of contact for younger pupils to approach, sometimes in relation to topics they may feel uncomfortable speaking to an adult about.

Mr Berginis said: “If we can get that right then we can create a generation of young people who act respectfully in their own relationships as teenagers and then when they grow to become adults, we might finally start to see domestic abuse statistics improving.”

Mr Berginis said it was the hard work, willingness and commitment of the young people involved which is the backbone of the programme.

He highlighted the feelings of one mentor from James Young High School who said : “When I was younger, I wish that there

had been a me that I could go to and speak to about these things. I want to be that person for other young people.”

By the end of the 23/24 session, 68 MVP-trained staff were working across the eleven secondary schools, an increase from 38 for session 22/23.

By the end of the 23/24 session, 234 senior pupils were trained as MVP mentors across eleven secondary schools, an increase from 158 on session 22/23.

In the last school year, 55 individual MVP lessons were delivered to pupils by mentors, compared to 30 lessons during 22/23.

Winchburgh Academy and Sinclair Academy, the two new high schools, do not have senior pupils so are currently unable to train any of their own MVP mentors. However, they have been supported by MVP mentors from other secondary schools visiting to deliver the lessons instead.

In his report to the PDSP Mr Berginis said: “The MVP programme seeks to help create respectful young people who understand issues such as consent and healthy relationships. They then grow up to become adults with those same values and are less likely to become perpetrators of abuse or involved in abusive relationships.

“Once embedded the programme is also shown to improve other outcomes in schools such as behaviour, attendance and attainment through creating a more respectful and supportive ethos and environment. Senior mentors also develop important leadership and presentation skills which can contribute toward their qualifications.”

Councillor Pauline Stafford said: “Thanks for this. This is a really great first report. Have we seen an increase in the number of incidents being reported.

Mr Berginis said: "We haven't seen an increase in numbers coming forward but from the national picture what the pattern is that we do tend to see a spike and not to be alarmed by that, and actually to see it as a positive about people being more confident about coming forward.

"Schools are reporting that pupils are coming forward, fights are being prevented, pupils are stepping up, taking ownership and not being a bystander."

Councillor Moira McKee-Shemilt said: "I look forward to this going forward. Good work."

Chairing the meeting, Councillor Andrew McGuire said: "I've had the good fortune to meet some of the mentors at West Calder and I know how valuable their work is. Thanks for bringing this to our attention. Well done."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter