

Women's Policy Group NI

RSE Consultation Questions: Guide to Responding

1. **The content of teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA should be factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion and these resources should not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception.**

We agree with this in principle, but why are we being asked this? The legislation requires exactly this, and it will have to be done this way; so it seems that asking the question is opening the door to those who oppose education around reproductive rights and especially abortion.

This must not be framed as a “controversial issue”, any more than other parts of the curriculum.

We also need to see an updating of the outdated resources and teaching materials in the RSE Hub, some of which is excellent but some of which is outdated.

We also believe that all resources MUST be factual, rather than “should be” as it is phrased above. The consultation says that the education must be comprehensive – there are guidelines for what this means which must be adhered to, and this means that all materials must meet this standard. In addition, outside organisations that provide RSE must be subject to review of their materials and methods to ensure that this standard is fully met.

2. ***Parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of the age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.***

While we agree that parents/carers deserve to be informed on all aspects of their children's education, again this frames this issue as one of special sensitivity. Once again the framing is problematic.

It is also a bit misleading; some of the topics listed in the consultation document as currently in the curriculum are in fact not covered as present and it includes some - particularly "abstinence" that does not belong in a modern RSE curriculum as it is harmful and counter-productive. LGBT+ issues must not be a separate issue but integrated into all parts of the RSE curriculum and the curriculum as a whole. We advocate for a reassessment of what belongs in the curriculum and that a review of the RSE Hub is carried out to ensure that the topics in the curriculum all have appropriate and up-to-date resources.

3. *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes at Articles 1-3 and 12 the rights of the child to 'express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously' and at Article 5 'the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child's increasing capacity to make their own choices.' The Department's guidance, when developed, should consider in such instances how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations.*

We disagree with this and we believe it is somewhat misleading about what children's rights entail. The rights of parents/carers and the rights of children are not meant to be in competition.

The adult's rights in this instance are designed to be used to make sure the child's rights are fulfilled, not to frustrate them or to trump them. The capacity to opt a child out of parts of the curriculum against their wishes can harm children especially LGBTQI+ children.

Opting out of some parts of the curriculum will limit the impact of the other parts of the curriculum; relationships and sexuality are intertwined and students deserve to know the full picture. The idea that opting out is a good option is based on a wrong assumption that RSE is fundamentally corrupting. RSE will work best when it is universal, and this should not be undermined. In light of the misinformation campaigns ongoing, it is vital that this not become the route to depriving significant numbers of children of their right to an education.

4. *Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's RSE policy and planned RSE programme.*

We agree with this only if EVERY part of the curriculum is treated in the same way, otherwise there are serious concerns, because once again it treats RSE as a uniquely controversial and troublesome subject.

It is a good thing for a school to have such a policy and a planned curriculum in ALL areas, and for parents/carers to have access to this kind of information so that they know what their child is learning about and can prepare to help them discuss and understand topics they may be studying - in every area; for example, it is good for parents to know if their children are reading novels or plays that cover upsetting topics that the parent/carer may want to discuss with their child.

Schools should have and should share their RSE policy as a matter of course, and the same holds true for all other school policies.