

**Briefing: Consultation on changes to RSE in Northern Ireland  
 October/November 2023**

**1. Background**

- Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is a live political issue in each of the nations across these islands right now.
- Alarming headlines and the approach of some international bodies, who have issued alarming but non-binding guidance on sex education, have raised genuine concerns about what might be taught in Northern Ireland now and in the future.
- RSE has been taught in Northern Ireland for many years. It is a compulsory part of the curriculum and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA) has been providing guidance on the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education in our schools since 2001.
- There is currently no automatic right of parents to withdraw their children from RSE provision but parents can request that their child be withdrawn from specific lessons and this will be considered by the school on an individual basis.
- There are minimum learning outcomes that all schools must cover. However, the curriculum also recognises the importance of flexibility. Schools can choose resources and deliver topics at times and in ways that are suitable for the school community.
- Each school has to have in place its own RSE policy, developed by the Board of Governors in collaboration with teachers, parents or carers, pupils and other educational and health professionals and in line with the ethos of the school.

**2. Legal changes**

- In June 2023, new legislation in the form of the [Relationships and Sexuality Education Regulations 2023](#) introduced a UN CEDAW recommendation into law in Northern Ireland. It requires that young people at Key Stage 3 and 4 (post-primary schools) should receive ‘*age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion*’.
- Effectively, these two issues of preventing early pregnancy and access to abortion are being added to the minimum content of what must be taught on the curriculum.
- Guidance must be issued for the delivery of this teaching by 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024.

**3. Current consultation**

- The Department of Education has issued a public consultation on the circumstances which provide for a parent/carer to request to have their child excused from being taught about these two new areas of ‘*prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion*’.
- Remember, this only applies in post-primary educational settings.
- You can respond to the consultation online until it closes on **24<sup>th</sup> November 2023**. The consultation can be accessed [here](#)
- There are two sections which contain four questions which are all framed in the form of statements. The options are given to either agree/disagree/neither agree nor disagree. There is room to provide additional comments within each answer.
- While this briefing provides some explanation and suggestions for how you may wish to respond, it is important that you use your own words.

**Section A – Legislative changes in the content of the curriculum**

Question 1 proposes “*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 will be responding **neither agree nor disagree**.
- It is important that schools can continue to teach these issues within their ethos and choose appropriate resources.
- It would be helpful to clarify who decides what is ‘age appropriate’ – CCEA, schools, teachers, parents?
- The Department and any guidance should make clear that ‘comprehensive’ teaching about ‘prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion’ does not mean schools or teachers or school nurses providing direct access to, referral to, or provision of contraceptives or abortion medication.

- Teaching facts in a way that is scientifically accurate would include that abortion is not a form of contraception but a range of chemical or medical interventions to end the life of a living and developing human baby/foetus.
- The phrasing 'access to abortion' is potentially problematic. There is a huge difference between teaching that abortion is legally available in this jurisdiction under particular circumstances and telling pupils exactly where they can go to obtain an abortion, providing literature with websites and telephone numbers, posters in the corridors, campaigning etc. This second approach would be totally unacceptable.
- There is an important distinction between not advocating or opposing a particular moral or ethical view on the one hand, and teaching that the issue itself is morally neutral on the other. The framing of the consultation clearly identifies that these are not morally neutral issues and we would have grave concerns if abortion was taught as either something which is good or as morally neutral/inconsequential.
- It is important that CCEA create and host resources which help teachers, parents and pupils to open up the ethical discussion which is encouraged in this consultation.
- It is important that different perspectives, including Christianity, are presented accurately and fairly, rather than as repressive.
- How will teachers be accommodated, if they feel unable to deliver specific material in a way that their school has required, because of reasons of conscience?

**Section B – Parental opt-out.**

**Q2 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.**

- *We will be responding **agree**.*
- Obviously it is important that parents are informed about what their children are being taught and resourced to continue conversations at home. They topics to be covered, learning outcomes and methodology should be provided.
- Parents should be informed if an external provider may be coming into school to deliver a session and who that external provider is. A teacher should always be present to make sure the teaching is sensitive to the school ethos.
- However, there are some more nuanced considerations when it comes to the proposal to make specific content available. There is a potential risk in widely disseminating sensitive content which has been carefully prepared for delivery by trained professionals in a classroom. For example, individual sentences or scenarios could be shared wildly out of context. Used in the wrong way, this could damage openness, transparency and trust between parents and teachers. At the same time if parents find out that something very inappropriate has been taught, this will also damage trust and relationships between parents and the school.

**Q3 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 will be responding **neither agree nor disagree**.*
- A fairly wide margin of appreciation is given to states in how they balance these rights of parents/carers and children in particular instances.
- While parents have the right to have children educated in line with their wishes on these issues and children have a right to education, there is no right for individual parents or children to determine alone exactly what is on the curriculum.
- It is important that school generally support parents in their role and do not intentionally, or inadvertently drive a wedge between pupils and their parents. Particularly in the earlier years of secondary school, it would seem wise that the presumption of any balance of rights is in favour of parents in most situations.
- The nub of the question is whether the guidance should help schools to consider specific instances and how these potentially conflicting rights are accommodated, or whether schools should make these judgements outside of guidance.
- This consultation details no specific situations in which the ability of a parent to request that their child be withdrawn actually applies. It is presumed that this decision would be made at the discretion of the school. Guidance in the form of broader principles is likely to be more helpful than outlining what to do in every given situation.
- In Wales, 15 year olds can opt back into sex-ed even if parents had opted them out – is this what is being considered? Is that an appropriate way to balance the rights of parents and children?
- While this is being framed in terms of 'rights' it is important that schools encourage and foster good relationships with parents, children and wider community.

Q4 Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's RSE policy and planned RSE programme.

- We will be responding **agree**.
- It is important that a school's RSE policy has been developed in consultation with parents and boards of governors and in line with the school ethos, then made publicly available or at least on request to pupils and parents/carers.
- Access to the 'overview' and 'planned programme' relates to the topics covered, learning objectives etc and as above does not necessarily mean access to a full script of everything that will be said in classes.

#### Additional comments:

Below are some wider observations about the consultation and it's framing. You may wish to make some similar points in the 'additional comments' sections as you respond to the questions:

- **Process** – It is worth registering a clear objection to the imposition of this legislation by the government in Westminster concerning a very sensitive and devolved matter.
- **Many Christians support the teaching of RSE** and these subjects, with obvious caveats around age appropriateness and the content involved. In many instances, these issues have been taught with great skill and sensitivity for years. The key is how they are framed and held sensitively within a school's ethos.
- **Affirm the positive**. There are some welcome statements in the consultation document which it could be helpful to draw attention to and affirm. For example;

*"Trusting the professionalism of teachers, schools have autonomy in designing a flexible curriculum that is tailored and responsive to the needs of their children and young people...It is a matter for teachers to decide how the curriculum should be delivered, which resources to use, and which specific topics should be covered"* (pg7)

*"teachers and pupils should be able to discuss and consider moral, ethical and religious issues that arise"* (pg7)

*"It is important that timely information is provided to parents/carers to ensure they can make informed decisions and can be reassured about what exactly is being taught."* (pg9)

- **Two clear aims could be** to ensure schools can continue to teach these issues within their ethos and to appropriately balance the freedom of conscience of pupils, parents and teachers.
- **This is a very short consultation**. What is missing?

#### 4. Taking a wider perspective

- This is not the only issue. We want our children to be well-rounded in their approach to these contested issues of identity, relationships and human dignity.
- Whatever happens in schools – parents and carers have the primary responsibility and privilege when it comes to helping our children understand and respond to these issues.
- There is a role too for churches in proclaiming and practising the Good News Story.
- If you're a church or youth leader there are some brilliant organisations who can help you with this.
- Let's encourage the many teachers who have been teaching RSE for years with care, sensitivity and respect.
- As well as the obvious concerns, there are also amazing opportunities to help shape the moral and spiritual formation of children and graciously witness to our wider culture.
- Pray for our children, their schools and all those involved in this area in this time of change.
- Talk to your children. It can be challenging but you can do this!
- [Download our Time to Talk resource](#).
- Build good and genuine relationships with your child's school. You might even consider joining the PTA or board of governors to offer your time and skills.
- [Contact your local MLAs](#), politely share your encouragements and concerns
- [Join the Evangelical Alliance](#) to help support this work and our wider goal of uniting the Church to make Jesus known
- Keep up to date on our [website](#) through social media.