



Committee for Education

Report of Mini-Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education

Ordered by the Committee for Education to be published 3 July 2026

Report: NIA183/22-27 Committee for Education

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Powers and Membership

Powers

The Committee for Education is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No. 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department of Education and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant delegated legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Education.

Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mr Nick Mathison MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Danny Baker MLA
- Mr David Brooks MLA^{1, 2}
- Mr Jon Burrows MLA^{3, 4}
- Mrs Michelle Guy MLA⁵
- Ms Cara Hunter MLA
- Mrs Cathy Mason MLA
- Mrs Julie Middleton MLA^{6, 7, 8, 9}

¹ With effect from 1 July 2025, Mr David Brooks replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee

² With effect from 9 June 2025, Ms Cheryl Brownlee replaced Mr David Brooks

³ With effect from 8 September 2025, Mr Jon Burrows replaced Mr Colin Crawford

⁴ With effect from 7 October 2024, Mr Colin Crawford replaced Mr Robbie Butler

⁵ With effect from 9 September 2024, Mrs Michelle Guy replaced Ms Kate Nicholl

⁶ With effect from 5 May 2026, Mrs Julie Middleton replaced Mr Peter Martin

⁷ With effect from 2 March 2026, Mr Peter Martin replaced Mr Gary Middleton

⁸ With effect from 23 September 2025, Mr Gary Middleton replaced Mr Peter Martin

⁹ With effect from 16 September 2024, Mr Peter Martin replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

ALS: Assembly Legal Services

DE: Department of Education

EA: Education Authority

ESR: Examiner for Statutory Rules

CRE: Comprehensive Relationship Education

RSE: Relationship and Sexuality Education

SEN: Special Educational Needs

RaISe: Assembly Research and Information Services

EOTAS: Education otherwise than at school

FE: Further Education

Executive Summary

1. The Committee for Education has heard the voices of young people express the importance of safe, healthy, boundaried relationships and sexuality; and their frustration with school-based RSE (relationship and sexuality education).
2. When it considered new delegated legislation to introduce mandatory content about contraception and abortion, and accompanying opt-outs, the Committee took the opportunity to explore current provision and establish whether it was time for RSE to be reviewed.
3. The Committee was keen to calibrate an approach that was age-appropriate, scientifically sound and comprehensive. The Committee also sought to find a balance that would respect school ethos while ensuring zero tolerance of bullying in school on any ground of identity, appearance, sexuality, privilege or background.
4. The Committee shares the hopes of parents that relationally, school can afford pupils a carefree childhood, safe play and learning and kind, respectful friends and values.
5. It also shares the responsibility of parents and educators to safeguard and equip young people to name; discern; and protect themselves from; bullies and other toxic peers, predatory bad actors and insidious online harms.
6. The Committee is also conscious that more broadly, social media; smartphones; and manipulative messaging that influences young people; need to be contained within a rights-respecting regulatory environment.
7. The Committee heard from pupils, parents, teachers, academics and relationship specialists about how to consult and create good RSE policy in an ideal world and in current practice.
8. The Committee does not itself have all the answers to make relationships a matter of pride in our school system, but it presents in this report the voice of young people, parents and teachers, and many tools, approaches and recommendations to improve this topic for everyone.

9. Young people did not consider that they had received consistent or adequate RSE. They advised that they would like this to be delivered regularly, and as a standalone subject, so they were aware of the main messages, rather than delivered in combination with other curriculum subjects and perhaps not signposted as RSE. They asked that the information be delivered without the filter of opinion or other perspective. They wanted to hear facts, primarily from their own teachers, in a safe learning environment where they could discuss matters with peers in an inclusive way.
10. The Committee was engaged by the submissions of the Mental Health Champion, the Critical Civility Project and others with empathetic approaches to RSE such as philosophy and ethics, trauma informed approach, rights-based tools, anti-bullying approaches, strategies co-created with targets of abuse or violence such as Women's Aid programmes, and a wealth of research and experience in working with children and young people from committed academics, youth workers, educators and other public servants.
11. The Committee is very conscious that children continue to face the risk of physical abuse and exploitation and are also targeted online by dangerous and inappropriate material. The Committee supports a cross-departmental approach to these harms and finds that RSE must be a key component in giving children the information, critical thinking skills and resilience to discern and protect themselves.
12. The Committee recognises RSE as a vital tool of safeguarding right from the early years of education and considers it inseparable from the drive to address bullying in school. Equally, the Committee considers RSE to be a key component in combating violence against women and girls and commends the cross-cutting interdepartmental approach to healing this scar on our social landscape.
13. At a high level, priority reforms recommended in respect of RSE here entail a calibrated approach to increase emphasis on statutory consistency, inclusivity, and monitoring; and alignment with NI, UK, and international obligations.
14. David Brooks MLA and Julie Middleton MLA advised the Committee that they are not endorsing the RSE report; notwithstanding much common ground on

issues such as, but not limited to, safeguarding, VAWG, consent and anti-bullying. On other issues, for example abortion and gender ideology, they cannot agree and believe re certain recommendations and text which may be capable of being read with different emphases and interpretations it would be disingenuous to do so understanding the differing positions on committee.

15. However, they have decided not to divide the Committee on individual decisions but to request this statement reflecting the position of their party within the report.

Introduction

16. The Committee began its mini-inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education in 2024 with the objective to understand current provision, good practice regionally and globally, and to make recommendations if necessary to improve provision.

Background and Context

17. During the hiatus in which the Assembly was not operational, which ended on 3 February 2024, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 decriminalised abortion here. Section 9(1) of the Act provided that “The Secretary of State must ensure that the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report are implemented in respect of Northern Ireland”.
18. Paragraphs 85 and 86 recommended that the UK Government, for NI:
19. “(d) Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation;” and
20. “(e) Intensify awareness-raising campaigns on sexual and reproductive health rights and services, including on access to modern contraception”.
21. The Secretary of State made the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 which came into force on 1 July 2023, inserting these requirements into the specification of minimum content for “learning for life and work: personal development” by amendment to The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007.
22. The Department carried out a public consultation into parental opt-out and on 1 January 2024 issued guidance to schools which included terms and a template in which parents might withdraw their child from the elements of early pregnancy and access to abortion.

23. The Department of Education also made the Curriculum (Circumstances in which a Pupil may be Excused from Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Education) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023, which too came into force on 1 January 2024.

Restoration of the Assembly

24. The Assembly was restored on 3 February 2024 and the Statutory Rule bringing these regulations into force was provided to the Committee for consideration at its first meeting on 14 February 2024.
25. The Examiner for Statutory Rules advised the Committee that these regulations were in the procedural category of negative resolution, namely that legislation is made, laid before the Assembly, and operating as law - but may be annulled by resolution of the Assembly within “the statutory period” i.e. whichever is longer of ten days on which the Assembly has sat or 30 calendar days.
26. The Examiner noted in her ‘First Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees 2023 – 2024’ on February 16, 2024, that the Department had not complied with the 21-day rule in respect of these regulations.

21-Day Rule

27. The Statutory Rule bringing the regulations into force breached the procedural 21-day rule which requires that, to ensure that the Assembly may carry out scrutiny before a rule comes into force, a statutory rule should be laid at least 21 calendar days before it is due to come into force (including the date of laying) and only be brought into force on the twenty-second day at the very earliest.
28. A Department or other rule-making body should not breach the 21-day rule unless there exists a compelling need for urgency which it should set out fully at the time of laying of the statutory rule in question.
29. The 21-day Rule acts to protect those who may be affected by changes in the law from being subject to those changes before they have had a reasonable

opportunity to understand the effect of the changes and what they must do to satisfy any requirements.

Justification for Breach of the 21 Day Rule

30. The Department explained in the Explanatory Memorandum accompanying the Statutory Rule that:
31. “Regulation 2(3) of the 2023 Regulations inserted a new Article 10A into the 2006 Order... Paragraph (5) of the new Article 10A imposes a requirement on the Department to make Regulations providing for the circumstances in which, at the request of a parent, a pupil may be excused from receiving the education required to be provided by Article 5(1A) or specified elements of that Article 5(1A) education. This Statutory Rule provides those circumstances.
32. “The Department is of the view that, in light of all of the above statutory obligations, whilst there is no statutory requirement to have this Statutory Rule operational on or before 1st January 2024, the abovementioned Statutory Framework would be incomplete without the Statutory Rule being operational in time for 1st January 2024. Accordingly, given the extant statutory obligations, and the fact that statutory guidance will be in situ on or before 1st January 2024, the Department feels compelled to breach the 21-day rule and make this Statutory Rule operational for 1st January 2024.”

Consideration of the Regulations

33. The Assembly was restored on 3 February 2024, and the Committee considered the Statutory Rule, explanatory memorandum, regulations, guidance, departmental briefing and advice of the Examiner for Statutory Rules (ESR) at its first and second meetings on 14 and 21 February 2024.
34. On 21 February 2024, Committee Members considered the regulations and guidance and expressed a range of views.
35. The Committee did not object to the secondary legislation but wanted to know more and decided to initiate a mini-inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education.

36. The item was minuted as follows:
37. 6. SR2023/122 Curriculum (Circumstances in which a pupil may be excused from Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Education) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023
38. Mr Brooks wished it recorded that the DUP regretted the Secretary of State's decision to update the relationship and sexuality education (RSE) curriculum in the absence of a sitting Assembly and emphasised that his party took a pro-life stance. However, he and his party would not object to the rule.
39. Ms Nicholl wished it recorded that she felt that the RSE curriculum was not sufficiently progressive, and she did not agree with the withdrawal of pupils.
40. Members shared views on the topic of RSE and discussed the holding of a mini-inquiry on the topic to include curriculum content, the rights of parents, and the rights of teachers to conscientious objection.
41. Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a mini-inquiry into relationship and sexuality education and to factor this into timings in forward work planning.
42. Agreed: The Committee considered SR2023/122 Curriculum (Circumstances in which a pupil may be excused from Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Education) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and had no objection to the Rule.

Committee Approach

43. On 1 May 2024, the Committee agreed that the objectives of its mini-inquiry would be:

“To compare the approaches to and outcomes of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in these islands and Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) internationally; to assess provision in NI; and to consider whether there was a need for reform and make conclusions, recommendations or note themes accordingly”.

44. It considered that within that; nine key areas were critical. These are listed below.

Terms of Reference

Detailed Terms of Reference for the mini-inquiry were agreed at the Committee meeting of Wednesday 22 May 2024.

In full, they are as follows:

“To compare the approaches to and outcomes of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in these islands and Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) internationally; to assess provision in NI; and to consider whether there was a need for reform and make conclusions, recommendations or note themes accordingly.

Areas of Focus for Mini-Inquiry into Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE):

- **Curriculum Integration and Content**

Evaluate how RSE integrates across different stages of the NI Curriculum, including key areas like Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level, and Learning for Life and Work at secondary level.

Assess the effectiveness of the statutory content and additional flexible content tailored by schools to meet specific community or pupil needs.

- **Policy Implementation and School Compliance**

Review the implementation and updating of school-based RSE policies, particularly in light of new subordinate legislation on topics such as early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion.

Investigate the extent of parental and pupil consultation in developing these RSE policies.

- **Resources and Support for RSE**

Analyse the availability and utilisation of the RSE Hub and other CCEA resources intended to support RSE delivery.

Consider the impact of external resources like those provided by the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on the uniformity of RSE content.

- **Teacher Training and External Providers**

Examine the adequacy of professional training and development for teachers tasked with delivering RSE, focusing on their preparation to handle sensitive aspects of the curriculum.

Assess the role and quality of external providers in RSE delivery, including their alignment with scientific accuracy and educational standards.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Evaluate the mechanisms for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of RSE, particularly the role of the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) and any changes needed in light of recent educational reforms.

- **Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity**

Review how effectively the RSE curriculum engages diverse student populations and respects the rights and beliefs of different communities, including considerations of inclusivity and scientific accuracy.

Assess the impact of school ethos on the impartiality and comprehensiveness of RSE delivery.

- **Legislative and Rights-Based Considerations**

Consider the implications of national and international rights standards on the delivery of RSE, including the rights of children to have access to comprehensive health education and the rights of parents to influence their children's education within legal frameworks.

- **Impact of Withdrawal Policies**

Study the effects and prevalence of policies allowing parental withdrawal from RSE, and their impact on student access to essential health education.

- **Violence against Women and Girls**

Reflect on the recommendations for the school system of the Gillen Review of Serious Sexual Offences and consider the role that RSE might play in developing consent education to reduce sexual violence, particularly against women and girls".

Recommendations

45. The Committee's evidence evinced clear commonalities and its recommendations spring from those findings.

Key Evidence heard:	Recommendations:
Part 1: High-level overview of priority reforms	1. RSE should be child-centred in content and delivery.
Part 2: Current Provision	
Curriculum Integration and Content - RSE is inconsistently embedded across the curriculum stages - Significant variation in content depth and inclusivity between schools - Lack of statutory clarity has led to gaps in delivery	2. DE should undertake a full review of the RSE curriculum content at both primary and post-primary level, as part of work pursuant to the curriculum review, to amend the Minimum Content Order to dictate that RSE must be standardised, inclusive, high-quality, evidence-based and age- appropriate. 3. This review should consider where the delivery of RSE sits within the curriculum, and consideration should be given to aligning this with the LLW review recommended by Lucy Crehan. 4. The Minimum Content Order should include content which reflects diverse identities and family structures.

Key Evidence heard:	Recommendations:
Policy Implementation and School Compliance; & Impact of Withdrawal Policies • School-level RSE policies are inconsistent and often outdated • Stakeholder consultation varies significantly • Parental withdrawal policies are applied unevenly • Parental withdrawal impacts child access to essential education • Lack of data on application and effects	5. RSE policies should be developed on a whole-school basis, including via consultation with parents and pupils 6. DE should bring forward guidance to support schools in consulting on their RSE policies and framework 7. The right to withdrawal from RSE should be gradually phased out, subject to the introduction of RSE that is standardised, inclusive, high-quality, evidence based and age appropriate. 8. DE should take a more proactive role in combating misinformation relating to RSE. 9. Schools must record data on pupils being withdrawn from RSE, including details of any specific topics they are withdrawn from.
Resources and Support for RSE • Access to CCEA resources and the RSE Hub is uneven • Concerns raised about ideological bias in some third-party materials	10. Schools should provide greater transparency for parents on who is teaching RSE and what resources are being used
• Teacher Training and External Providers • Teachers lack confidence in delivering sensitive RSE content	11. DE should Introduce mandatory (or increase specialist pathways) for RSE including CPD for initial and in-service teacher training 12. DE should provide schools with updated guidance on a. How to utilise third party providers and

Key Evidence heard:	Recommendations:
• CPD opportunities are limited and not mandatory • External provider quality and alignment varies widely	b. how to ensure that any third-party resources are shared with parents, giving them the opportunity to engage with these resources.
Monitoring and Evaluation • No consistent mechanisms for monitoring RSE delivery or effectiveness • ETI involvement is limited in scope	13. DE should expand the inspectorate's remit to include RSE policy and teaching. 14. DE should collect data on a. the number of pupils being withdrawn from RSE b. what aspects of RSE they have been withdrawn from and c. a list of external providers who have been utilised by schools to provide RSE.
Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity • School ethos sometimes limits inclusive RSE • Children's voices insufficiently reflected in policy decisions	15. DE should support schools to maximise parental involvement and engagement with the development of RSE 16. RSE should be children's rights compliant, providing unrestricted access to RSE which is standardised, inclusive, high-quality, evidence-based, and age appropriate. 17. Children and Young People should be a key stakeholder in the Curriculum Review 18. RSE policies should be inclusive and reflect a diverse range of gender and sexual identities and family types
Legislative and Rights-Based Considerations • NI obligations under UNCRC and CEDAW not consistently met	19. RSE policies should be aligned to international standards on human and children's rights. 20. DE should review current legislation and departmental guidance to improve consistent

Key Evidence heard:	Recommendations:
Gaps remain in delivering rights-based health education	delivery of information about abortion, contraception and consent. 21. All recommendations from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in relation to RSE should be fully implemented.
Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (and child safeguarding) - Lack of consistent consent education - Missed opportunity to integrate VAWG prevention	22. A review of the Minimum Content Order must include consent and healthy relationships. 23. The Minimum Content order should include age-appropriate education in relation to elements of RSE that relate to the use of the internet including Child Sexual Exploitation, social media use, pornography, toxic masculinity and risks of criminalisation due to the sharing of indecent images. 24. There should be no right of withdrawal for any element of RSE that is directly concerned with safeguarding and protecting children and young people from sexual abuse and exploitation 25. DE should engage thoroughly on all recommendations arising from the Gillen Review in relation to RSE to ensure that these have been complied with 26. As a key component of the Programme for Government, DE should ensure that RSE adequately covers tackling Violence Against Women and Girls 27. DE should link RSE to wider safeguarding and gender-based violence strategies

The Committee's Process

46. The Committee commissioned research reports and sought recommended stakeholders from RaSe.
47. The Committee took considerable academic and practitioner evidence to establish a comprehensive picture of the state of RSE.
48. Researchers selected by specialism advised the Committee on perspectives from international CSE; RSE in these islands; and current provision in this jurisdiction.
49. Their work can be read in the Hansard reports and academic articles and written submissions in the appendices to this report.
50. The Committee gathered written and oral evidence, factoring in legal, social science, religious and ethical perspectives and discussing with different school sectors their approaches, best practice and insights, particularly into the impact of ethos.
51. Throughout the latter part of 2024 and early 2025 the Committee took evidence from a wide variety of sources. The mini-inquiry expanded as many academics as possible, stakeholders, parents and interest bodies took the opportunity to present their views and research on the platform presented by the inquiry

Approach to engagement

52. The Committee agreed to receive a wide range of views and in particular to carry out significant youth engagement on the matter.

Stakeholder engagement

53. Dedicated evidence sessions informal meetings and events were held to accommodate a youth audience.
54. In addition, the Committee invited views from its list of core stakeholders, and Committee members added interest groups of relevance to this.
55. These contributors gave written and oral evidence to the Committee.

Oral Evidence

56. The Committee for Education's evidence session with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) highlighted significant concerns that the current RSE curriculum does not meet human rights standards, particularly in relation to consent, LGBTQ+ issues and violence against women.
57. The witness panel stressed the importance of scientifically accurate and comprehensive provision, while raising issues around parental opt-out arrangements, teacher confidence, reliance on external providers and the adequacy of monitoring. The NIHRC evidence indicated that RSE in Northern Ireland schools is inconsistent, insufficiently rights-compliant and poorly monitored. It stressed the need to strengthen statutory content, improve teacher training, clarify opt-out rules and embed inclusivity and scientific accuracy across all schools.
58. The Committee's session with the Department of Education and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) underscored the variation in the delivery of RSE across schools, with many teachers and governors lacking confidence to address sensitive issues and a need for stronger professional learning frameworks. Officials outlined ongoing work to issue revised guidance, informed by extensive consultation with over 14,000 young people, and supported by CCEA resources such as the RSE hub and exemplar materials. ETI confirmed that its new inspection framework will monitor RSE provision, including age-appropriate and scientifically accurate content, and will gather system-wide data through pupil, parent and teacher questionnaires. Evidence also addressed the complexity of parental opt-out provisions, particularly for Year 12 pupils, and stressed the importance of balancing parental rights with the child's right to education and ensuring the child's voice is heard. The Department emphasised its role in supporting the Executive Office's strategy on ending violence against women and girls and the Gillen Review implementation, underlining the need for RSE to contribute to consent education and safeguarding.
59. The Education Authority (EA) emphasised its limited role and resourcing in RSE support, while CCEA outlined the statutory curriculum pathway, the RSE hub,

and progression framework. Both highlighted teacher confidence issues, the need for collaboration, and stakeholder engagement.

Monitoring remains primarily with ETI, while CCEA continues to expand resources to address emerging issues, including violence against women and girls.

60. Invisible Traffick's evidence emphasised the role of external providers in delivering specialist education on exploitation and trafficking, complementing statutory RSE. Their programmes integrate with curriculum strands, improve awareness, and engage parents and communities. They highlighted funding pressures, safeguarding gaps, and the need for comprehensive education on consent and bodily autonomy to counter exploitation, toxic masculinity, and violence against women and girls.
61. Many respondents expressed strong support for the provision of age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), recognising its importance for all school-age children. In oral evidence to the Committee on 2 October 2024, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Chris Quinn, reinforced this priority, noting that NICCY has consistently advocated for comprehensive, factual and scientifically based RSE in schools, a position also underscored in the organisation's written submission.
62. The Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS) emphasised the importance of delivering RSE within a Catholic ethos, combining statutory requirements with values-based education. They highlighted parental consultation, pupil voice, and school autonomy as central to effective delivery. Sensitive topics such as consent and abortion are addressed but framed within Catholic teaching alongside alternative perspectives. Stakeholders stressed the need for transparency, inclusivity, and teacher confidence, with external providers used selectively to complement in-house provision.
63. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) evidence emphasised RSE as a safeguarding tool, supporting compulsory, inclusive, and scientifically accurate provision across all schools. They highlighted wide variation in current delivery, the importance of

teacher confidence, and the need for parental and pupil engagement. Their programmes (*Speak out Stay safe*, *Talk PANTS*, *Talk Relationships*) provide age-appropriate resources, adapted for SEN, and are widely used across Northern Ireland. NSPCC opposed parental opt-out, stressing equity and safeguarding, and underscored the role of RSE in preventing abuse, promoting consent education, and tackling harmful behaviours.

64. The Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) emphasised that RSE cannot be value-neutral and must be delivered within the ethos of controlled schools, combining factual information with moral and ethical perspectives. They supported parental consultation, teacher training, and careful use of external providers. While recognising the importance of consent and safeguarding, they argued for parental withdrawal rights on abortion and contraception, and stressed inclusivity, respect, and critical thinking as central to "excellent RSE."
65. Evidence from the Rainbow Project and HERe NI indicated that significant gaps remain in current RSE provision, with many young people receiving little or no education beyond the minimum statutory requirements. The organisations highlighted the need for statutory reform to ensure coverage of key areas such as consent, gender equality, violence prevention, online safety, and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities across all content. They emphasised the importance of strengthening teacher training, reducing reliance on external providers, and fostering safe, inclusive classroom environments. Safeguarding and the prevention of gender-based violence were identified as urgent priorities.
66. Dr Áine Aventin's evidence, drawing on the JACK trial and the Healthy Young Adult Relationships (HYAR) study, highlighted both the benefits and challenges of engaging parents in RSE provision.
67. The JACK trial, which evaluated a film-based programme for 14–16-year-olds, found that parental involvement was limited, with only 27% accessing online resources and very few completing parent-child homework exercises. Barriers included lack of time, fear of condoning sexual activity, cultural and religious norms, and low confidence, while facilitators included early and sustained

engagement, brief accessible materials, and promoting RSE as a joint parent-school responsibility.

68. The HYAR study, focused on 16–20-year-olds in community settings, revealed that parents often lacked understanding of concepts such as coercive control and unhealthy relationships, felt ill-equipped to discuss these issues, and wanted education and support for both them and their children. Across both studies, teachers were found to lack adequate training and confidence, sometimes avoiding sensitive content or adding personal beliefs, which undermined consistency.
69. Aventin emphasised that fact-based RSE should form the foundation of provision, with space for values and beliefs to be discussed at home, and recommended that schools provide culturally appropriate resources, equip teachers to engage parents, and ensure that young people who are withdrawn from RSE still receive evidence-based education. These findings underline the importance of parental engagement, teacher training, and safeguarding in delivering comprehensive, inclusive RSE.
70. Summary tables of oral evidence are below and the full Hansard transcripts within appendices to the report.

Summary of Oral Evidence

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
Curriculum Integration and Content Evaluate how RSE integrates across different stages of the NI Curriculum, including key areas like Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level, and Learning for Life and Work at secondary level. Assess the effectiveness of the statutory content and additional flexible content tailored by schools to meet specific community or pupil needs.	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission	Highlighted concerns that the current RSE curriculum does not meet human rights standards, particularly regarding consent, LGBTQ+ issues, and violence against women. Witnesses emphasised the need for scientifically accurate, comprehensive RSE, raised questions about parental opt-out provisions, teacher confidence, external providers, and monitoring.	“Our view, looking at the wording included at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, is that it is not explicit enough on certain issues including consent, which is in agreement with the Gillen report; LGBTQ+, which is in line with what the expert panel on the LGBTQ+ strategy have said about the need for that to be specifically referred to; and violence against women, which also needs to be specifically referred to. Those are some but not the totality of elements that, the international human rights system says, need to be included in a compulsory curriculum on relationships and sexuality education.”-Dr Colin Caughey “We know what the basic minimum should be to protect children's right to education: scientifically accurate and comprehensive. The determination of what is comprehensive and scientifically accurate will be for others, because we are not experts in that. However, we do know that it has to include reproduction, reproductive rights, pregnancy and consent — all those things that protect	The Committee was urged to strengthen statutory content, ensure teacher training, clarify opt-out rules, and embed inclusivity and scientific accuracy across all schools.

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				children at school and beyond.”- Alyson Kilpatrick	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	DE-ETI		“Schools and centres should, with support, be able to provide pupils with access to a well-planned, creative, progressive and responsive programme of learning across the curriculum that is integrated seamlessly into the existing curriculum offering.”-Linsey Farrell (DE) “We took the views of primary-school and post-primary-school children. Some of the primary-school children wanted to know more about gender and identity. That was the P7 children who, largely, filled in the evaluation for us. In post-primary schools, issues around consent and, in particular, child sexual exploitation (CSE) came through as strong themes.” Dr McCann (ETI)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		“RSE — relationships and sexuality education — has been included in the Northern Ireland curriculum since the current curriculum was introduced in 2007. It is a statutory component of personal development and mutual understanding in the primary phase and in learning for life and work at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. However, the	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				delivery of RSE is not restricted to those specific strands of the curriculum, and there should be many opportunities for a cross-curricular approach to RSE within the other areas of learning.” - Esther Martin (CCEA) “That begins the progression pathway through school from Foundation Stage right up to Key Stage 4, and the same themes continue.” – Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA) “He third key concept is relationships. Obviously, in that period, they begin to develop a much deeper understanding of relationships and how to navigate them. That includes the like of exploring the qualities of relationships, including friendship, boundaries, gender issues and what constitutes a healthy relationship. It also explores the qualities of a loving and respectful relationship and what that means, and strategies to deal with challenging relationship scenarios that arise naturally during the course of their schooling at Key Stage 3 and their wider social life. They learn about conflict and the implications of sexual maturation, including sexual health,	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				fertility, contraception, conception, teenage pregnancy and childbirth. They learn to explore the emotional, social and moral implications of early sexual activity and risk-taking. All of that is important.” Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Need for universal provision: “RSE is vital in preparing children and young people for life. It is necessary that they all receive that education, regardless of who they are or which school they go to.” Maddison Blair Curriculum gaps: “Consent is a very important aspect of RSE, and the curriculum does not highlight it nearly enough.” Maddison Blair Scientific accuracy and vocabulary: “The curriculum should include all relevant scientific terms — for example, for body parts — because that is vital to ensuring that young people are confident in their bodies, and to removing any stigma.” Maddison Blair	
	Official report,	Catholic Schools’	Evidence from the CSTS highlighted that while	Integration across curriculum:	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	Trustee Service (CSTS)	RSE is formally located within <i>Learning for Life and Work</i> at post-primary level and <i>Personal Development and Mutual Understanding</i> at primary level, in Catholic schools it permeates all areas of the curriculum. Witnesses described a clear progression of topics, beginning in primary education with themes such as family, friendships, safety, growth, change, and puberty, and extending at post-primary level to issues including consent, intimacy, marriage, fertility awareness, pornography, and women's safety. Consent education was noted as a recurring theme, introduced early in non-sexual contexts to reinforce the principle that it is acceptable to say no, revisited in later years through scenarios on personal safety, and addressed in senior years in relation to legal and sexual activity.	"While the RSE component is identified as an element of learning for life and work at post-primary level and of personal development and mutual understanding at primary-school level, an RSE programme in a Catholic school, like the Catholic ethos, will permeate all areas of the curriculum." Fintan Murphy Progression of topics: "At primary level, that includes... me, my family, my friends; keeping safe; growing and changing; decisions and consequences; puberty and new life. At the post-primary level, topics covered include... consent; love and intimacy; sex and marriage; fertility awareness; pornography; and women's safety." Mairead Greene Consent education: "Consent can be addressed at a very young age... not in a sexual sense but in the sense that it is OK to say no... Consent is brought up again in year 12... and in year 13... in the legal sense and about sexual activity." Mairead Greene	
	Official report,	NSPCC		Support for compulsory RSE:	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024			“The NSPCC supports compulsory, high-quality and inclusive relationships and sexuality education.” Caroline Cunningham Safeguarding focus: “Our interest in RSE is as a tool for safeguarding... there needs to be enough in it to keep children safe from harm.” Caroline Cunningham Primary programmes: “The NSPCC’s safeguarding programme for children aged four to 11 is called Speak out Stay safe... It helps children to understand abuse in all its forms and how to recognise the signs of abuse.” Karen Walker Progression to post-primary: “The NSPCC’s Talk Relationships programme... supports schools to take a whole-school approach to building capacity among school leaders and teachers to more confidently deliver healthy relationships education.” Karen Walker	
	Official report, Minutes of	Transferor Representatives’ Council		Holistic approach: “RSE must consider the whole person — physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually — and should be taught	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Evidence, 9 October 2024			in a way that respects the school's ethos." Dr Andrew Brown, PCI Critical thinking: "Critical thinking involves the breadth of world views... You cannot take a neutral stance on RSE... It is about world views and examining those world views. That is what creates critical thought." Dr Andrew Brown, PCI Fact-based teaching with moral framework: "Facts are there to be taught, but our view is very much that we need to be careful around promotion... As long as the 'fact-based' is fact and not promotion of a particular lifestyle." Dr Andrew Brown, PCI	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		Current gaps in provision: "Many people just had not heard of RSE... If they had had RSE delivered, it had happened only once — one time — perhaps in a whole-school assembly with a distinct focus on biology, menstruation or things like that." Alexa Moore, Rainbow Project Minimum content limitations: "The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order... does not explicitly	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				cover some topics... consent; violence prevention... gender equality and misogyny; domestic and sexual abuse; menstrual health and well-being; and social media and online safety.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI Need for inclusivity: “An inclusion of LGBTQIA+ relationships and sexuality across all content areas would mean that we can move away from teaching RSE through a heteronormative lens.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 23 October 2024	Children's Law Centre (CLC)	CLC argues that all children should have access to comprehensive, age appropriate, evidence based RSE, including: - scientifically accurate sexual and reproductive health education - consent - healthy relationships - prevention of early pregnancy - access to abortion - safeguarding and gender-based violence - inclusion of LGBTQ+ young people and young people with disabilities	“RSE provision in Northern Ireland appears generally to be inconsistent, inadequate and failing to meet the needs and expectations of many young people, including LGBTQ+ young people and those with disabilities.” “In our research that was conducted in 2022, we asked young people in a survey, which had just over 1,000 responses, whether the RSE that they received was adequate. Only 35% said yes. That was quite a low number. Some replied, "I don't know", but the vast majority said no.” “We are also clear in our view of the need for RSE to be seen as an equal and valid part of the curriculum when compared with other aspects of the curriculum.”	- Whether the upcoming curriculum review will explicitly include RSE. - Whether minimum content should be rebuilt from scratch or expanded from the current order. - How to ensure RSE reflects the lived realities of young people.
Policy Implementation and School Compliance Review the implementation and updating of school-based	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission		“In some cases, materials were not comprehensive, pluralistic or objective; were outdated; and did not reflect relevant changes to the law.”- Alyson Kilpatrick Alyson Kilpatrick explained that while there is room for ethos in education, it	Our report recommended amending the law to include the prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. A compulsory component of the curriculum is key, and implementation should be monitored.

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
RSE policies, particularly in light of new subordinate legislation on topics such as early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion. Investigate the extent of parental and pupil consultation in developing these RSE policies.				must not undermine the fundamental right to education. She emphasised that information presented as scientifically accurate in RSE cannot be contradicted as wholly inaccurate in RE. Ethos has a place, but only within limits that preserve objective educational standards.	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	DE-ETI		“Developing RSE policy is a statutory duty that lies with the boards of governors and the principals.” “We see that being done effectively when there is consultation with parents, governors and pupils.” Dr McCann (ETI) “In our evaluation, 96% of schools said that they were continually refreshing their RSE policies and that they had been updated in the previous two years. The preventative curriculum, which Elaine discussed, sits alongside that. Just over a quarter of schools were not reviewing it to the same extent, and that delivery area needs to go hand in hand with RSE provision.” Dr McCann (ETI)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence,	EA-CCEA		“While all schools are required by the Department to have an RSE policy, as you will know, individual schools have a fair degree of autonomy as to how they shape and deliver it. That is similar	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	11 September 2024			to other areas of the curriculum. "John Unsworth (EA)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Variation in delivery: "In most schools, there is very little RSE in place and very little discussion with young people about what should be included in RSE. Love for Life came into my school... You sat in a room and were given a presentation." Maddison Blair Need for policy beyond guidance: "My opinion is that we need more than guidance; we need a policy. There is probably a role for the ETI in looking at quality-assuring how RSE is taught within the curriculum." Chris Quinn	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	CSTS		School autonomy: "It is therefore important that schools continue to have the autonomy to determine the content, timing and delivery of appropriate RSE topics." Fintan Murphy Parental consultation: "School communities are the family of families... That involves schools consulting with parents and carers on the policy and curricular offer for RSE." Maria Maguire	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				Transparency: “To ensure transparency, our schools are encouraged to make the detailed RSE programme available to parents, which offers them reassurance.” Maria Maguire	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	NSPCC		Variation in provision: “Non-statutory provision has resulted in a wide variation in the quality and quantity of RSE provision.” Caroline Cunningham ETI findings: “Too many schools/centres avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects... of the preventative curriculum.” (ETI report, cited by Caroline Cunningham)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives’ Council		School policies: “Every school is required to have a policy that outlines its approach to RSE... delivered and developed collaboratively by governors, parents, teachers and other stakeholders.” Dr Andrew Brown PCI Parental consultation: “We stress the importance of parental consultation when creating or updating	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				those policies, especially on sensitive issues.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI	
				Teacher autonomy: “Teachers should not be forced to teach things with which they ethically and morally disagree.” (TRC briefing, cited by Dr Andrew Brown, PCI)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		Variation across schools: “Schools from different denominations with a varying school ethos can decide how detailed their RSE provision is... That often leads to topics... being excluded or covered only in passing.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI Postcode lottery: “It is a bit of a postcode lottery. It depends on where you go, what school you are at and even what happens within schools.” Alexa Moore, Rainbow Project	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 23 October 2024	Children’s Law Centre (CLC)	•Evidence suggests many young people leave school without receiving even the minimum statutory entitlement. •CLC warns that school autonomy and curriculum flexibility have contributed to inconsistent delivery.	“The evidence points to the fact that many young people are leaving education without having received the minimum entitlement that they should be receiving. That very much indicates to me that there are instances in which it is not being taught or young people are being allowed to	•How the Department will enforce compliance when schools fail to deliver minimum content. •Whether informal opt outs or avoidance practices are widespread and how they are monitored.

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
			- Concerns raised that some schools may avoid delivering RSE or allow pupils to skip lessons due to ethos or parental pressure. - CLC emphasises that minimum content is legally required and must be delivered irrespective of ethos.	not attend that aspect of the curriculum.” Fergal McFerran “We are clear that the flexibility of the curriculum, the autonomy of schools and the capacity and confidence of teachers have all contributed to the clear need for more substantial reform in that area.” Fergal McFerran	
Resources and Support for RSE Analyse the availability and utilisation of the RSE Hub and other CCEA resources intended to support RSE delivery. Consider the impact of external resources like those provided by the Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service and the Council for Catholic Maintained	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	DE-ETI		“We have also been working with CCEA to develop exemplars. CCEA has developed three so far — one for post-primary schools, one for primary schools and one for special schools — that it hopes to publish on its RSE hub soon, and it will develop more for us. Those are examples of very good practice.” - Sam Dempster DE	The Committee was advised that CCEA would provide a separate briefing on their ongoing support for curriculum delivery through the RSE hub and the progression framework introduced the previous year.
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		EA support limits: “It is very limited at this stage. We have an outline template that could be used, but that is the limit of it. We simply do not have the resources to do more.” John Unsworth (EA) RSE hub and progression framework: “The RSE progression framework is a non-statutory progression framework that gives guidance to teachers from	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
Schools on the uniformity of RSE content.				Foundation Stage to education post-16. It shows teachers how to cover the priority themes, which were commissioned by DE in the first instance. Those priority areas of RSE include consent, developments in contraception, domestic and sexual violence and abuse, healthy positive sexual expression and relationships, internet safety, LGBTQ+ matters, sexual and reproductive health and rights, social media and its effects on relationships and self-esteem, teen parenting and period dignity and menstrual well-being. So, there is a wide range of topics and issues that have to be covered in an age-appropriate way. The progression framework is there as guidance for teachers to help them do that.” Deirdre Coffey (CCEA) Accessibility: “The hub has open access. Sometimes, we hear about parents not knowing what the schools are teaching. Anyone can go on the RSE hub and access the resources or look at the progression framework.” Deirdre Coffey (CCEA)	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				“The hub was suspended, pending a review, in December 2023 and reinstated on 7 June 2024. There were no fundamental changes to the hub as a result of the review. Some information was updated and obsolete links were removed. The findings of the review were that CCEA had followed a detailed and evidence-based approach to the development of age-appropriate resources and guidance for RSE.” Deirdre Coffey (CCEA)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 18 September 2024	Invisible Traffick		“The service is free for schools because they have limited budgets, and we do not want that to be a barrier to education.” Megan Phair, (Invisible Traffick) “We are so oversubscribed with the programme that we have school bookings until January 2026. We have one staff member who runs the entire programme.” Megan Phair, (Invisible Traffick)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Inclusive resources: “Young people need to be able to see themselves in the resources. A lot of the resources are heteronormative, with no reference to same-sex relationships.” Dr Arlene Robertson	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				Special educational needs: “More bespoke resources and training were needed in special schools... That is also the case for pupils in mainstream schools.” Dr Arlene Robertson	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	CSTS		Guidance and materials: “We have collaborated closely with schools and others to develop a range of supports, including guidance documents, curricular materials and staff training materials.” Fintan Murphy Adaptability: “We created the materials to be used online... Doing that allows us to hear what schools and students want and to evolve the materials as issues arise.” Fintan Murphy	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	NSPCC		Programmes widely used and provided by the NSPCC: “We have delivered Speak out Stay safe in 94% of primary schools here.” Karen Walker Adaptations for SEN: “Speak out Stay safe is also available in an adapted version for children in special schools, and, most recently,	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				we rolled out a pilot for EOTAS.” Karen Walker Resources for parents: “Our free Talk PANTS resources... ensure that children grow up understanding that their bodies belong to them... We have a range of bespoke materials for children with special education needs and materials in Makaton.” Karen Walker	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives’ Council		CCEA resources: “We acknowledge the progress that has been made in developing RSE resources, particularly through collaboration with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)... We support the use of CCEA’s RSE hub.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI Worldview representation: “We ask that those resources reflect different world views, such as the Christian belief in the sanctity of life, or that of abstinence from sex until marriage.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI	
	Official report, Minutes of	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		CCEA framework: “CCEA has a sound RSE progression framework... However, it is not statutory, meaning that schools	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Evidence, 16 October 2024			can leave those topics behind.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI Teacher resourcing: “Currently, RSE is delegated to teachers who have gaps in their timetable, leaving them very little time to develop materials for their class.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI	
Teacher Training and External Providers Examine the adequacy of professional training and development for teachers tasked with delivering RSE, focusing on their preparation to handle sensitive aspects of the curriculum. Assess the role and quality of external providers	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission		“Research demonstrates that pupils respond best when they are taught RSE by a teacher whom they know and have confidence in. We would be concerned if external providers were being used as a substitute for the school providing RSE. In our report and recommendations, we mention that it could be an add-on. Ultimately, however, the school is the public authority that has been commissioned to provide those services to schoolchildren.”-Dr Colin Caughey	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11	DE-ETI		“The key theme has been teacher confidence and the sense that teachers do not currently feel confident and equipped to deliver RSE.” Linsey Farrell (DE)	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
in RSE delivery, including their alignment with scientific accuracy and educational standards.	September 2024			“They also wanted it to be normalised and to have a safe space in which they could get scientifically accurate knowledge from teachers who are confident. Some of them said, “I don't want my teacher standing nervously at the top of the class, handing out worksheets and not being willing to talk about this”. They wanted their teachers to be able to talk to them normally, and therefore to normalise it for them. That was huge for them and came across very strongly in their views.”- Elaine McAllister (ETI)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		Confidence issues: “The teachers are clearly crying out for tailored support to deliver it. They do not have the competencies in the new stuff, in particular.” -Roisin Radcliffe, CCEA Webinars: “We also held some teacher webinars to support teachers. We had really good uptake of those, despite the fact that there was action short of strike. That shows the interest of teachers in this particular area of work.” Deirdre Coffey (CCEA) Need for collaboration:	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				“We do not have a remit for training, so we will need to collaborate with the Education Authority and other parties on that.” Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 18 September 2024	Invisible Traffick		“Teachers, as great as they are, are not experts in all subject matter, so we should not expect them to be. That is especially the case for subjects like human trafficking, which is evolving constantly, and exploitation, which is becoming more prevalent and more visible.” “I view myself... as a catalyst for conversation, especially in certain schools and youth centres where those topics and conversations are really difficult.” The staff at alternative education spaces and youth centres are trained by me... We are accessible to those people. We are the resource.”	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Teacher confidence: “Young people... asked for more in-depth discussions and delivery by teachers who are confident, knowledgeable and comfortable with the topics.” Chris Quinn Investment needed:	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				“Sufficient investment in teacher professional training to ensure that they are supported and equipped to deliver high-quality and comprehensive RSE must be a priority.” Chris Quinn Hybrid approach: “There are experts, particularly in the community and voluntary sector, who can support... I would argue for a hybrid approach, where voluntary sector organisations come in and provide a block of bespoke training.” Chris Quinn	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	CSTS		Teacher delivery preferred: “Research has shown that young people want RSE delivered by the people they know in a confident and informed manner.” Mairead Greene Role of external providers: “Schools will... want to determine whether the use of external providers can enhance the school’s offer... All schools that use external providers are encouraged to meet the provider to ensure that any programme... fits into the school policy.” Mairead Greene	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				Consistency with ethos: “When we have an external agency in, we have a service level agreement... so that its message is still very much set in the context of our values and ethos.” Mairead Greene	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	NSPCC		Teacher confidence: “We provide everything that schools need... including benchmarks, examples, self-assessment tools and editable action plans... There are also two e-learning courses for teachers... to help them build their confidence in delivering RSE and responding to abusive behaviours.” Karen Walker Support for schools: “The NSPCC is clear that teachers and schools must be fully supported to deliver RSE.” Caroline Cunningham	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives’ Council		Professional development: “The TRC stresses the importance of professional development for teachers who are delivering RSE and calls for fully funded, regular training.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI External providers: “We also advocate transparency when using external providers... ensuring	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				that those providers align with the school's ethos and that parents are informed about what is being taught." Dr Andrew Brown, PCI	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		Upskilling teachers: "Our recommendation... is that [the Department] should upskill and resource specialist staff to deliver RSE... to ensure that knowledge and expertise... is developed in-house." Sophie Nelson, HERe NI Role of external providers: "Particularly for LGBTQIA+ young people, the delivery of LGBT awareness and anti-bullying workshops... may be one of the only ways that LGBTQIA+ young people see themselves being visible in a school context." Sophie Nelson, HERe NI Concerns about reliance: "Bringing in external providers to deliver the whole RSE curriculum is not a sustainable approach. It leads to patchwork provision of RSE that differs between schools." Sophie Nelson, HERe NI	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
Monitoring and Evaluation Evaluate the mechanisms for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of RSE, particularly the role of the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) and any changes needed in light of recent educational reforms.	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission		“We are concerned that the process for monitoring is not effective. For example, we are unsure if sufficient data has been collected since the regulations came into force. In particular, we wonder if any proper data is being collected on parents opting to withdraw children from lessons.”- Alyson Kilpatrick	“We recommend that that data, including the reasons given for withdrawal, should be collected, and that it should be disaggregated to determine whether any specific groups are disproportionately affected. That is a specific thing that can be done to ensure proper monitoring.”-Alyson Kilpatrick
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	DE-ETI	The Committee were told that a full programme of inspections was scheduled for the academic year following the end of industrial action. The new framework, <i>Empowering Improvement</i>, published on the ETI website, identifies four core areas for inspection, including curricula for all and health, well-being and keeping safe, with specific reference to RSE provision.	“We will also ensure that the provision and planning for the whole preventative curriculum in RSE is age- and stage-appropriate. We report objectively on what we find, and we tend, as you said, to find that there is a variety in the quality out there. However, we will challenge when the provision is not good enough.” Elaine McAllister (ETI) “As we now engage in a full inspection programme and will have the answers from those questionnaires coming in from every inspection, we will, after a period of time, be able to monitor the answers to those questions, and that will give us some system-wide data on how well things are going, as well as information on individual schools.” Elaine McAllister (ETI)	Officials emphasised the importance of supporting schools to develop this confidence and share good practice. They further confirmed that inspection would play a central role in strengthening system-wide quality assurance and committed to reporting to the Assembly on the Secretary of State’s changes by 1 September 2026.

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		The Chairperson clarified that responsibility for monitoring the quality and appropriateness of RSE policies rests with the Education and Training Inspectorate. Witness confirmed. Monitoring hub use “For who accesses the hub, we have data analytics, but we cannot break those down into whether it is parents, teachers or students. We can do that through questionnaires and consultation. That is the only way in which we can access that information.” Esther Martin (CCEA)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY	Both Chris Quinn and Dr Arlene Robertson cited an ETI report: “It specifically mentions that the practice of RSE was much more effective when: <i>“pupils’ views were used to inform and develop the preventative curriculum”.</i> That overlaps what young people broadly tell us about inclusion.”	Quality assurance concerns: “Part of the issue is this: who is monitoring it and what are they monitoring? ... It could easily be a tick-box exercise. It is about quality and how much time it is given.” Dr Arlene Robertson	
	Official report, Minutes of	CSTS		Pupil voice in evaluation: “We use [pupil voice] regularly to ask pupils what their needs are and to reflect on the programmes that are	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Evidence, 2 October 2024			offered so that we can tailor them.” Maria Maguire Feedback loops: “At the end, we reflect on them and ask the pupils, ‘What was good? What wasn’t of any use to you?’.” Maria Maguire	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives’ Council		Policy review: “Schools should review and update their RSE policies regularly to reflect changes in society, especially concerning social media’s impact on young people.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		Inconsistent delivery: “We have heard from two young people at the same school who had really different experiences of RSE because they were in different years and there were different teachers providing it.” Alexa Moore, Rainbow Project	
Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity Review how effectively the RSE curriculum engages diverse	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission		“The scientifically accurate information that is given should not differ depending on the religious belief. What may differ is their attitude to, for example, abortion or prevention of early pregnancy on faith grounds, but it should not affect	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
student populations and respects the rights and beliefs of different communities, including considerations of inclusivity and scientific accuracy. Assess the impact of school ethos on the impartiality and comprehensiveness of RSE delivery.	September 2024			the scientifically accurate information that is given to children.”-Alyson Kilpatrick	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	DE-ETI		“Pupils really want to be active and have their views sought and heard by the school, but that is happening for only 50% of them, which is a concern.” Dr McCann	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		Stakeholder involvement: “we have engaged with lots of stakeholders in health, justice and online safety... including the Public Health Agency (PHA), the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), the Education Authority, Church representatives and groups with specific areas of expertise.” Deirdre Coffey, (CCEA) Inclusivity and diversity: “We have set up our stakeholder group in such a way that we can get feedback and have the opportunity for deep discussions with a very diverse and wide range of groups that have a responsibility and remit to support children and young people.” Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA)	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 18 September 2024	Invisible Traffick		“We have been embraced by a broad spectrum of schools, regardless of religious affiliation.” “We do a needs analysis of the communities that we go into. I am not naive about the realities of the communities in which we work. We have to tailor things differently from Broughshane to Belfast, because there are different needs and different risks in different communities.”	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Youth involvement: “Engaging with as many young people as possible from those groups and from as many different backgrounds and areas as possible... will ensure that you have a fully developed curriculum.” Maddison Blair Inclusivity gaps: “RSE in schools is just not inclusive. There has not been enough focus on how we respond effectively to findings about pupils with special educational needs and disability or LGBTQ+ pupils.” Dr Arlene Robertson	
	Official report, Minutes	CSTS		Parental engagement: “We encourage schools to engage fully with parents in a consultation process	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	of Evidence, 2 October 2024			and to make them aware of the curricular content... through the parent forum.” Maria Maguire Inclusivity challenges: “The growing multicultural nature of our society has brought additional challenges on cultural norms, requiring schools to engage in discussion... In some situations, that will result in compromise.” Maria Maguire Respecting lived experience: “The values will be respectfully proposed to young people, while listening and being attentive to their lived experiences.” Fintan Murphy	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	NSPCC		Youth voice: “61% of young people in Northern Ireland strongly agreed or agreed that they would like a say in what they learn... 63% said that they want a say in how they learn about it.” Caroline Cunningham, NSPCC survey 2022 Parental engagement: “We support teachers in relation to common questions that parents might ask and how to respond... bringing	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				parents along on the journey is really important.” Karen Walker	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives’ Council		Safe environment: “Lessons should be delivered in a safe environment in which students can express their personal views without fear of repercussion.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI Respect for diversity: “Controlled schools are open to those of all faiths and none... The Christian ethos is based on... love, duty, tolerance, respect and inclusivity.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI Handling sensitive views: “Any bullying... or homophobic remarks should not be allowed in the classroom and should be moderated... The ethos of the school is care for the pupil.” Dr Anita Gracie, Methodist Church in Ireland	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		Safe space for LGBT pupils: “It does not happen by saying, ‘OK. Is homosexuality wrong? Yes or no? Put your hand up if you think yes...’. That singles people out, and it also serves to ostracise and marginalise the LGBT young people who might be in	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				that room.” Alexa Moore, Rainbow Project Integration across curriculum: “When you talk to primary-school kids about their parents... it is not that hard to say, ‘There may be a mum and a dad, but there could also be a dad and a dad or a mum and a mum’.” Alexa Moore, Rainbow Project Teacher confidence: “The Department could have a really key role... by upskilling teachers to be able to feel confident in tackling questions about sexual orientation and gender identity and to be able to create a safe space.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI	
Legislative and Rights-Based Considerations Consider the implications of national and international rights standards on the delivery of RSE, including the rights of	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission		“In 2018, the United Nations CEDAW Committee published its report on the inquiry into sexual and reproductive health rights in Northern Ireland. It made a number of recommendations, one of which was for the UK Government and NI Executive to: <i>“Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum</i>	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
children to have access to comprehensive health education and the rights of parents to influence their children's education within legal frameworks.				<i>for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation".</i> The exact wording is important because that started everything off. The recommendation was later given domestic effect through the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019. That Act placed a duty on the Secretary of State to address that recommendation, which he did."- Alyson Kilpatrick "Parental views cannot strip a child of their rights."-Alyson Kilpatrick	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		Rights-based approach: "We have taken a values- and rights-based approach to our work...RSE empowers young people to explore, develop and understand their own personal values. Esther Martin (CCEA) Alignment with law: "More recently, since the intervention of the previous Secretary of State, there has been age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, which	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				covers the prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.” Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 18 September 2024	Invisible Traffick		Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is about the right to participation... Article 19 discusses the right to protection against mental and physical violence... Articles 34, 35 and 36 discuss the right to be protected from sexual exploitation, trafficking and all other forms of exploitation.”	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Children’s rights framework: “Comprehensive RSE is relevant to a wide range of children’s rights... the right to education; the best interests of the child; the right to health; the right to protection from violence and abuse.” Chris Quinn UNCRC guidance: “State parties should... integrate comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based education... without the possibility for faith-based schools or parents to opt out.” (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, cited by Chris Quinn) Balancing rights: “It is a balancing act, but the important aspect... is that the fundamental right	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				to education is not undermined when balancing parental rights and children's rights." Joanne McGurk	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	CSTS		Ethos in legislation: "The current legislation very specifically says that RSE should be delivered in the context of the ethos of the school. For us, that is very important." Fintan Murphy Coverage of sensitive topics: "Our schools have covered topics like abortion for a long time... They deliver them from a particular perspective... but they would also talk about the reality that, legally, it is possible to have an abortion." Fintan Murphy	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	NSPCC		Support for regulations: "We welcomed the introduction of the regulations last year and the contribution that... the new requirements will make towards the delivery of RSE at Key Stages 3 and 4." Caroline Cunningham Safeguarding priority: "For us, faith, ethos or whatever we want to call it should not be the issue. It is about... safeguarding children every time." Caroline Cunningham	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives' Council		Concerns about mandated content: “We are concerned about the content that was mandated by the former Secretary of State... RSE teaching should remain responsive to local community needs and reflect the ethos of each school.” Dr Andrew Brown PCI Abortion and contraception: “Parents should be fully informed... and should have the right to withdraw their children from lessons on those two areas.” Dr Andrew Brown PCI Balanced teaching: “As Churches, we have no objection to... teaching about contraception... We would lay that out as part of the health objectives.” Dr Anita Gracie, Methodist Church in Ireland	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		Need for statutory reform: “Too many young people above the age of 14... had received little to no sex education... The current approach... is not an adequate method of delivery.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI Equality obligations: “All pupils... should receive factual and scientific information to enable them to make informed choices in relation to	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				their sexual and emotional health and well-being.” Sophie Nelson, HERE NI	
Impact of Withdrawal Policies Study the effects and prevalence of policies allowing parental withdrawal from RSE, and their impact on student access to essential health education.	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	DE-ETI		Year 12 opt-out: “The reason that we chose year 12 was to do with Gillick competence, meaning that if you are 16 and above, you are taken as competent to make your own decisions unless there is evidence to the contrary. That is not to say that younger people cannot also object, but some sort of assessment needs to be done on their competence to make that call.” Sam Dempster (DE) Balancing Rights: “It is about balancing parental rights with the child's rights. The team spent a lot of time on that point.” Linsey Farrell (DE)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		EA Role: “When new regulations are brought in... we simply remind governors, through our training programme and through any individual work with boards of governors, of their obligations and duties.” John Unsworth, EA School Autonomy:	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				“Whilst the process of developing a policy and identifying teaching materials and resources... is very much a matter for schools themselves,” John Unsworth, EA	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 18 September 2024	Invisible Traffick	While not directly addressing opt-out provisions, Invisible Traffick highlighted the importance of ensuring all children receive education on consent, choice and bodily autonomy , implying that withdrawal could leave children vulnerable.	Indirect relevance: “The exploitation of children and young people can stem from inadequate education about consent, choice and bodily autonomy.”	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Opposition to opt-out: “Parents should not be able to opt out of RSE for their children. That would help to protect children and young people.” Maddison Blair Weakness in guidance: “It was disappointing that the pro forma did not even have a space for the young person’s signature to say that they had been consulted or for them to give their views.” Dr Arlene Robertson Evolving capacities: “Article 5... reflects their ‘evolving capacities’, which means that they should be given increasing	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				responsibility to make decisions for themselves.” Dr Arlene Robertson	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	CSTS		Parental choice and compromise: “In some situations, a small number of children may not access parts of the proposed programme. The experience of many schools is that that compromise often results in parents reflecting on their decisions and agreeing to their child’s participation in future.” Maria Maguire	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	NSPCC		Opposition to opt-out: “The NSPCC, as an organisation, does not support an opt-out. For us, it is about everyone getting the same safeguarding messages on RSE. It is about inclusivity and equity.” Caroline Cunningham	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives’ Council		Parental rights: “Parents should... have the right to withdraw their children from lessons on [abortion and contraception].” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI Balance with student needs: “We support a balanced approach where parents’ rights are respected without compromising the educational needs of students.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project	Evidence implied that opt-out provisions risk excluding young people from essential safeguarding information.	Concerns about opt-out: “Information on abortion and the prevention of early pregnancy... is subject to parental opt-out.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI	
Violence against Women and Girls Reflect on the recommendations for the school system of the Gillen Review of Serious Sexual Offences and consider the role that RSE might play in developing consent education to reduce sexual violence, particularly against women and girls.	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission		“Our view, looking at the wording included at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, is that it is not explicit enough on certain issues including consent, which is in agreement with the Gillen report; LGBTQ+, which is in line with what the expert panel on the LGBTQ+ strategy have said about the need for that to be specifically referred to; and violence against women, which also needs to be specifically referred to.” - Dr Colin Caughey “We highlight the need for the issue of female genital mutilation to be included in the curriculum in paragraph 5.1.13 of our report.” Dr Colin Caughey	“He regulations have made changes in relation to termination of pregnancy and prevention of early pregnancy, but the scope of other issues that we discuss in our report have not been addressed by way of that amendment. We are keen to pick up the debate in relation to such issues as consent, violence against women, female genital mutilation and the range of other topics that have been highlighted.” - Dr Colin Caughey
	Official report, Minutes of	DE-ETI		Departmental role: “The Department remains a key partner in support of the Executive Office's strategy on ending violence	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Evidence, 11 September 2024			against women and girls. Officials also attend the Gillen implementation review group, which the Department of Justice chairs. Significant work is being taken forward in the Department on RSE.” Linsey Farrell (DE) “In post-primary schools, issues around consent and, in particular, child sexual exploitation (CSE) came through as strong themes.” Dr McCann (ETI)	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2024	EA-CCEA		Curriculum content: “Priority areas of RSE include... domestic and sexual violence and abuse... internet safety... period dignity and menstrual well-being.” Deirdre Coffey (CCEA) Strategic engagement: “We have engaged widely, for example, with the Gillen review implementation group for education and the online safety board on the elimination of violence against women and girls.” Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA)	“Our forward work plan... includes the active bystander approach. We have units coming out on upskirting, downblousing, cyber-flashing, sextortion, perimenopause and menopause, masculinity, the influence of positive role models and male victims of domestic abuse.” Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA)
	Official report, Minutes of	Invisible Traffick		Consent education: “The exploitation of children and young people can stem from inadequate	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
	Evidence, 11 September 2024			education about consent, choice and bodily autonomy.” Toxic masculinity: “We have a culture of toxic masculinity with the Andrew Tates of the world, and a lot of young men are getting their education from those people. We need to counter that.” Gender inclusivity: “We do not base our work and our programme around gender... all children and young people can be sexually exploited.”	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	NICCY		Consent and boundaries: “No means no, even for something as seemingly harmless as hugs. If a child is not comfortable, it does not matter how small the contact seems.” Maddison Blair Social media and misogyny: “It is easy to fall into traps online... Andrew Tate... spreading false, misogynistic information and promoting toxic masculinity. Young people should be taught how to identify misinformation.” Maddison Blair	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				Alignment with EVAWG strategy: “That would also be in line with the new ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG) strategy.” Maddison Blair	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 2 October 2024	CSTS		Women’s safety and consent: “Consent is brought up again in year 12, when we look at women’s safety... For example, you are at a party where a male comes over and puts his hand around your waist... That has been done without your consent.” Mairead Greene Responding to misogyny: “We have found that a lot of the flexibility in the curriculum comes about through issues in the media, such as misogyny in the reporting on Andrew Tate.” Maria Maguire	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	NSPCC		Consent and harmful behaviours: “Talk Relationships... includes modules on online relationships, hurtful behaviour, sexual harassment, consent, sharing nudes and unhealthy relationships.” Karen Walker Safeguarding against abuse: “Educative programmes present an opportunity to make sure that all young people know that they have a right to	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				be treated, and a responsibility to treat others, with dignity and respect.” Caroline Cunningham	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 9 October 2024	Transferor Representatives’ Council		Consent education: “We recognise the importance of teaching about consent and healthy relationships to protect young people and to prevent sexual violence, particularly against women and girls.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI Gillen review: “We acknowledge the relevance of the Gillen review and support RSE’s role in fostering respect and understanding in relationships.” Dr Andrew Brown, PCI	
	Official report, Minutes of Evidence, 16 October 2024	HERe NI; Rainbow Project		Urgency of prevention: “In the North, four women were killed in six weeks... due to femicide. We have an epidemic of gender-based violence here, and its prevention needs to start in school in relationships and sexuality education.” Sophie Nelson, HERe NI) Safeguarding priority: “Young people need to be able to identify when they are experiencing abuse or coercive control, when they are at risk and when they should talk to	

Inquiry theme	Evidence source	Respondents	Key extracts/issues raised	Comments	Further scrutiny
				someone about it.” Alexa Moore, Rainbow Project	

Youth Stakeholder Event

71. The table notes and plenary discussion flipcharts from this discussion are summarised as follow:

Summary of Evidence Taken at Committee for Education Stakeholder Event on RSE – 15 October 2024

Experience of how RSE programmes are currently designed and delivered

- Highly inconsistent delivery: RSE is not taught uniformly across schools, with variation in content, frequency and quality
- Lack of dedicated structure: often delivered through Learning for Life and Work or across subjects, resulting in fragmented and unfocused learning.
- Low priority in schools: Some students perceive RSE classes as “free periods” with little structured teaching.
- Limited coverage of key issues: Topics such as misogyny, domestic abuse, coercion, and homophobia are often not addressed.
- Teacher discomfort and lack of training: Many teachers feel unprepared or uncomfortable teaching RSE, impacting quality.
- Inconsistent continuation: RSE may stop before post-16 level, leaving gaps in education.
- Better delivery outside school: Youth clubs and external providers sometimes offer more effective, engaging RSE.
- Influence of opt-outs and school ethos: Parental opt-outs and religious/cultural considerations can restrict access to full RSE content.
- Lack of student voice: Young people are not sufficiently consulted in how RSE is designed or delivered.

Key Drawbacks

- Overall systemic weakness seen as a broad failure across curriculum design, teacher training, resources and policy coherence.
 - Inconsistent and limited resources use: Available materials (e.g. CCEA resources) are not consistently used.
 - Teacher bias and attitudes: Personal beliefs can influence delivery; RSE is sometimes treated as a burden rather than essential education.
 - Time and capacity constraints: Teachers struggle with workload and prioritisation.
 - Opt-Out system issues: Parents can remove students, sometimes overriding young people's wishes and limiting safeguarding knowledge
 - Lack of inclusivity and accessibility: Resources are not always adapted for different languages, cultures, or needs (e.g. Irish language, Braille)
72. The core message heard at this event was that RSE reform should not simply be about adding more guidance. Stakeholders are pointing to a system design problem: unclear entitlement, inconsistent delivery, insufficient teacher training, variable school commitment, contested opt-out arrangements and inadequate monitoring.
73. Stakeholder evidence indicates that RSE provision is currently too dependent on individual school practice, teacher confidence and school ethos. Reform should therefore establish a clear, age-appropriate and inclusive minimum entitlement for all pupils, supported by trained staff, accessible resources, meaningful youth participation and transparent monitoring of delivery.

Survey

74. The Committee agreed an indicative timeline for a written survey, a separate youth survey co-created with the Youth Assembly, a call for views to its core stakeholders and a series of oral evidence sessions and stakeholder events.
75. The Committee reissued its call for views to take account of feedback received and to make it more open and accessible to stakeholders keen to reply. For instance, some stakeholders asked for a text box in every instance, feeling that, yes/no questions were leading. This in turn reduced the quantitative response and increased the qualitative response, which is more difficult to collate.
76. Given the exhaustive terms of reference, the surveys were substantive. Many respondents replied to only a few questions.
77. Survey Summaries have been prepared and are in the appendices to the report.

Written Submissions

78. Stakeholders writing directly to the Committee with their views provided comprehensive insight and perspective. These are summarised by theme, below.

Theme of written sub	Respondents	Outline of Evidence
Curriculum Integration and Content	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine; Dundonald Gospel Hall ; National Secular Society; Prof. M Brown; NICCY; Love for Life ; WPG NI ; Parentkind ; Women's Platform ; ICNI ; M Collins Foundation; Humanists UK ; HerNI; Policywise ; NIHRC ; Parenting Focus; ECNI; CCEA; Mental Health Champion; Alliance for Choice; Methodist Church Ireland ; Dr S King-Hill (QUB); CARE NI; Faith Voices; NASUWT ; Ulster Teachers Union ; Presbyterian Church ; Ind Autism Reviewer NI; Dr S Whitten; CSTS ; Women's Aid	Majority of respondents welcome age-appropriate comprehensive, scientific based teaching of RSE and are aware of its importance for all school- age children. Support the new legislation brought about to include preventative contraception & access to abortion in 2003. This is essential for protecting children and young people's health and wellbeing – including safeguarding them from abuse and exploitation. The NIHRC said teaching young people that contraception is wrong "contradicts risk-reduction approaches to youth sexual activity" The Majority of respondents recommended that RSE should not be taught according to religious principles as this will exempt some children from receiving information in relation to certain topics of RSE. Several organisations recommend a standardised approach across all schools (green type) but with need to be flexible to deal with emerging issues. One respondent recommended that RSE is standardised across all regions (Policywise). A small number of respondents who agree with the majority on teaching of RSE nonetheless believe it should continue to be taught according to the moral ethos of school. (in blue type) Prof Brown highlighted the need for RSE policy to be developed and

Theme of written sub	Respondents	Outline of Evidence
		delivered for those with Intellectual Disability. This was reinforced by the Autism Reviewer in respect of need to design a policy to suit autistic kids. Uster Teachers Union also highlighted need to address RSE with SEN kids. Content Recommendations to be mandatory: Consent Online Safety Awareness LGBTQ+ relationships VAWG Healthy and unhealthy relationships – spotting red flags; how to seek support; Misogyny-understanding the pyramid of sexual violence; Navigating social media; and Image Based Sexual Abuse. Respect and dignity, Bodily autonomy, Child protection - inappropriate touching, Female genital mutilation M Collins Foundation recommended need for specific curriculum focus on Artificial Intelligence (AI) within RSE so that children and young people can engage with it safely, recognising benefits, as well as risks associated.
Policy Implementation and School Compliance	Dundonald Gospel Hall; NSS; Prof M Brown; Parentkind; Women's Platform; Marie Collins Foundation; Rainbow & HERe NI; Parenting Focus; CCEA; Mental Health Champion NI; Alliance for Choice; Methodist Church Ireland; Dr Sophie King-Hill; CARE NI; Faith Voices; NASUWT; Ulster Teachers Union; Presbyterian Church; Autism Reviewer NI;	Majority of Respondents of opinion that Parents should be consulted and informed about RSE topics within school as better engagement reduces risk of parents removing child from certain aspects, however mandatory minimum curriculum should not be determined by parents. One respondent (Women's Platform) do not see need for Parents to be consulted as RSE falls fully within the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, so no requirement for any additional or specific information to be shared with parents. A number of respondents emphasized need for Input from a range of academic and professionals in the field is imperative. M Collins Foundation stated

Theme of written sub	Respondents	Outline of Evidence
	Dr Suzanne Whitten; CTCS; Women's Aid.	that RSE mandatory minimum curriculum should not be determined by parents. Such content should be set according to experts within public health and safeguarding, having regard to information that CYP need to maximise their personal health, wellbeing, and interpersonal relationships. Prof Brown stated that to effectively support in special school settings, agreement regarding core content that proactively includes the voices of children and young people with intellectual disability and their parents is necessary. Several respondents advised a new approach to RSE is required. Autism Reviewer NI stated the approach needs to be more person-centred and trauma-informed. Dr Suzanne Whitten (QUB-Philosophy) research found that PwC methods and principles, have been proven to be effective in fostering positive affective relations, trust, and a democratic ethos among participants to an inquiry.
Teacher Training and External Providers	NSS; Prof M Brown; Love for Life; WPG NI; Women's Platform; ICNI; M Collins Foundation; Rainbow & HERe NI; PolicyWise; NIHRC; ECNI; CCEA; Dr Sophie King-Hill; CARE NI; Methodist Church; NASUWT; Ulster Teachers Union; Presbyterian Church; Autism Reviewer; CTCS; Women's Aid	All respondents called for better training for teachers of RSE and external practitioners and for this to be incorporated into the teacher training programme. All stated the importance of teachers/trainers being confident in the knowledge and delivery. Teacher training programmes must address issues related to culture and different religious ideologies. CCEA also recognises that there is a need for comprehensive Teacher Professional Learning to ensure that teachers have both the confidence, skills and the knowledge to deliver RSE effectively. External providers can have an important role to play in the delivery of effective RSE. They should not be used to replace the role of the teacher, but they can bring specific specialized

Theme of written sub	Respondents	Outline of Evidence
		knowledge and approaches to learning about a range of RSE matters, e.g. Women's Aid. The Majority of respondents advised against using faith-based organisations as external providers stating faith and public health do not mix and it is often at the detriment of the young people. The NSS referred to the Parents for Inclusive Education Northern Ireland (PfIE) report published in March noted that some religious bodies take stances on sensitive issues which can "hurt, exclude and other, creating harmful social dynamics and significant mental health risks".
Monitoring and Evaluation	Prof M Brown; ICNI; PolicyWise; NIHRC; ECNI; CCEA; Methodist Church; NASUWT; Ulster Teachers Union; CTCS;	All respondents who gave evidence on this theme stated that monitoring of RSE should come under the ETI. There should be a consistent approach to monitoring and ensuring compliance with policy & provision. The NIHRC recommends that the Department of Education collects data on the number of children and young people withdrawn from RSE lessons, including the reason for their withdrawal. Data should be disaggregated to determine whether any specific groups are disproportionately impacted by the provision for opt-outs Prof Brown: RSE programmes need to incorporate clear outcome measures and include formal evaluation, an integral element of delivery to identify impact and whether the intended outcomes have been achieved. It is highlighted that programme evaluation and research should involve all key stakeholders including young people with ID and their parents.
Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity	London School; Dundonald Gospel Hall; NSS; Prof M Brown; Love for Life;	All respondents agree that consultation with children and parents is essential. Parents should be informed of the

Theme of written sub	Respondents	Outline of Evidence
	Women's Platform; ICNI; Humanists; Rainbow & HERe NI; NIHRC; CCEA; Mental Health Champion; Presbyterian Church; Methodist Church; Dr Sophie King-Hill; CARE NI; Ulster Teachers Union; CTCS	content and there should be proactive engagement. Majority of respondents emphasized the need to involve healthcare and other professionals in the field when developing RSE policies. A number of respondents including the NIHRC agreed that Content should be evidence-based and designed by experts in the field. Prof Brown emphasized the need for experts with knowledge and experience of the relationship and sexuality needs and concerns of people with ID. Majority agreed that Content should be fully inclusive of all young people. CCEA stated that Schools should also recognise the diversity of family life today, particularly the fact that some children may have gay, lesbian or bisexual parents or carers, some of whom may be in a civil partnership. All staff should be sensitive and respectful of difference, ensuring that no pupil ever feels or is excluded, or experiences bullying due to their family or home circumstances.
Legislative and Rights-Based Considerations	NIHRC; WPG NI; Women's Platform; Marie Collins Foundation; Rainbow Project & HERe NI; CCEA; Dr Sophie King-Hill; CARE NI; NSS; Prof Brown; Faith Voices; CTCS	ALL respondents refer to the UNCRC - supports children and young people's rights and this should underpin approaches and decisions surrounding RSE. WPG NI & Women's Platform Draw attention to the obligations of the UK to recognise reproductive rights as a specific human rights issue in international law. As a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UK is required to take action to ensure all women and girls can enjoy their full human rights, which under the Convention includes access to full sexual and reproductive rights and services.

Theme of written sub	Respondents	Outline of Evidence
		NIHRC state that RSE legislation, policy and guidance should reflect international human rights standards by expressly articulating the fundamental right of children and young people to an education and to exercise agency and autonomy in the exercise of that right.
Impact of Withdrawal Policies	NSS; Parentkind; Dundonald Gospel Hall M Brown; WPG NI & Women's Platform; Marie Collins Foundation; Rainbow Project & HERe; ICNI; Humanists; Parenting Focus; NIHRC; ECNI; CCEA; Mental Health Champion; Alliance for Choice; Dr Sophie King-Hill; CARE NI; Faith Voices; NASUWT; Ulster Teachers Union; Presbyterian Church; CTCs	Majority of respondents do not agree that parents should be able to withdraw their children from RSE topics and consider this to be safe-guarding risk. This is supported by NASUWT & Teachers Union. ICNI argue that they do not agree with Parents being able to withdraw child from RSE as not all children and young people live within safe households, or are involved in healthy relationships Faith based respondents argue that parents should have right to decide what their child is educated in support parental withdrawal. Care NI highlight that there is a fine line between balancing the rights of children and parents/carers and setting those rights against one another. ECHR and the UDHR include clauses which affirm the primacy of parents in education, and their right to access education for their child which aligns with their religious and philosophical convictions. Indeed, we at CARE NI strongly affirm the primacy of parents' decision-making within education.
Violence against Women and Girls	WPG NI; Women's Platform; Humanists UK; PolicyWise; NIHRC; CCEA; Mental Health Champion; Alliance for Choice; Methodist Church; CARE NI; NASUWT; Ulster Teachers Union; Presbyterian Church; CTCs; Women's Aid	All respondents of opinion that adequate RSE is essential to tackling VAWG in our society. Women's Platform state the EU Directive on combating violence against women and girls does not specify a curriculum, although it emphasises the importance of access to information. The NIHRC recommends that the RSE curriculum includes violence against women and girls as a mandatory component and that it reflects international standards.

Theme of written sub	Respondents	Outline of Evidence
		Majority of respondents recommended the need to include CONSENT education within RSE as this will help address the stigma surrounding victims of violence. Sir John Gillen said: "I'm a firm believer that children as young as five and six should be introduced, at a child friendly level, to the concepts of consent, to the concepts of responsibility in relations with the opposite or same sex, as the case may be."

Committee Consideration

Part 1: To compare the approaches to and outcomes of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in these islands and Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) internationally

79. The Committee invited a range of academic stakeholders specialist in different aspects of the terms of reference, most of whom contributed at least to writing and with submissions of their relevant work and many of whom presented live to the Committee to have the opportunity to take questions.

CRE - Comprehensive Relationship Education/CSE – Comprehensive Sexuality Education

80. CRE is another name for teaching young people about relationships and their role in society, framing the development of the young person and the requirements of healthy social engagement more holistically. Internationally, it is recognised as implicating the whole person and for that reason, contributions regarding RSE and mental health and RSE and bullying are reflected in this section.
81. This overarching perspective goes beyond the mechanics of delaying first sexual experiences, preventing pregnancy and disease and giving young people the skills to manage their relationships healthily and safely; by also giving a positive perspective. This was expressed by one NI academic, Dirk Schubotz, who moved here and made it his career's work to address a topic he found no one else would. *"RSE is not an ordinary subject, because it goes to the core of who we are as human beings and of our relationships, our emotions and how we feel. We are human beings and social beings only because of the relationships that we have. From that point of view, I strongly advocate that RSE should probably be the most important subject that we teach in school because it is core to who we are".*

82. In its International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) states that:
83. *“Sexuality Education is defined as an age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sex and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgemental information. Sexuality Education provides opportunities to explore one’s own values and attitudes and to build decision-making, communication and risk-reduction skills about many aspects of sexuality”.*
84. Professor Maria Lohan also quoted from this guidance in presenting international understandings of CSE:
85. *“Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives”.*
86. The guidance notes that comprehensive sexuality education goes beyond reproduction, risks and disease and should include *“ongoing discussions about social and cultural factors relating to broader aspects of relationships and vulnerability, such as gender and power inequalities, socio-economic factors, race, HIV status, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity”.*
87. It finds that education programmes will be less effective if they omit key issues. For example, it states that *“failure to discuss menstruation can contribute to the persistence of negative social and cultural attitudes towards it”.*
88. Other issues that should not be omitted include *“the [sexual and reproductive health] needs of young people living with disabilities or HIV; unsafe abortion and harmful practices such as [child, early and forced marriage] and [female genital mutilation/cutting] or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity”.* It argues that *“[s]ilencing or omitting these topics can contribute to*

stigma, shame and ignorance, may increase risk-taking and create help-seeking barriers for vulnerable or marginalised populations”.

89. In fact, discussions by members of the Committee with newcomer and migrant groups in the Committee’s stakeholder meetings made this point keenly. Parent representatives and young people from these groups wanted school to give a steer with age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically sound information on relationship and sexuality education.

Legislative and Rights-Based Considerations

90. The introduction of relevant subordinate legislation is chronicled above at the point at which the Committee was engaged to consider it. However, these developments were preceded by prolonged and significant work by actors concerned at the picture captured of inadequate RSE via the UN reporting bodies. This picture is framed by the local and international human rights context and illuminated not only by relevant caselaw of the European Court of Human Rights but by decisions of the UK courts.
91. The mini-inquiry was book-ended by two pieces of work by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC).
92. The Commission published its 'Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform' in June 2023, assessing the extent to which post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are providing "*age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion*". This assessment chimed with the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 2018 Report cited above.
93. The investigation found that "*there are some positive examples of post-primary schools providing comprehensive and scientifically accurate Relationships and Sexuality Education. However, in the majority of schools this is not the case, where resources are not always considered to be comprehensive, pluralistic and objective. There were also some examples of schools using resources which were outdated*".
94. The NIHRC notes that within the international human rights framework, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights in interpreting the Convention, are of most direct application here, as they are given direct effect by the Human Rights Act.
95. On RSE, the Commission cites A.R. and L.R. v. Switzerland, Application No 22338/15, judgement of 18 January 2018, saying "*In its jurisprudence, the ECtHR has identified that RSE pursues a number of legitimate aims including*

the preservation of health, the prevention of sexual violence and exploitation. In addition, RSE prepares children for social realities”.

NIHRC 2023 ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform’ Report Recommendations	NIHRC 2025 Progress report Recommendations Implementation status:
1. The NIHRC recommends that the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007 is amended to reflect the CEDAW Committee recommendation 86(d) to “<i>make age- appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation.</i>”	Effective implementation [green]
2. The NIHRC recommends that the NI Office, with the support of the Department of Education NI, develop options for reform of the Minimum Content Order. Draft amendments should be developed to achieve the aim of ensuring that all elements of comprehensive RSE are delivered within every school in NI. The amendments should be sufficiently prescriptive to guarantee a standard level of RSE throughout all schools in NI.	Some steps that are assisting with implementation [Amber]
3. The NIHRC recommends that the NI Office and Department of Education NI develop an implementation plan to accompany the proposed reforms to the Minimum Content Order. This should include the development of a Circular to schools providing guidance on the key elements of ‘comprehensive’ RSE. This should be developed following engagement with relevant stakeholders and	Limited steps that have had little impact in terms of implementation

NIHRC 2023 ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform’ Report Recommendations	NIHRC 2025 Progress report Recommendations Implementation status:
experts to ensure that RSE programmes are inclusive and meet the educational needs of young people with diverse gender and sexual identities, ethnic minority students and disabled students.	[Red]
4. The Department of Education NI should support schools to amend their policies and procedures relating to RSE to ensure they fully consider any reforms to the Minimum Content Order.	Limited steps that have had little impact in terms of implementation [Red]
5. In line with the pre-existing arrangements for monitoring the delivery of the curriculum it is recommended that the ETI amend their oversight arrangements to ensure that schools are appropriately delivering the new elements of the Minimum Content Order. The ETI should develop new arrangements for engaging with children and young people during their assessment of RSE provision.	Effective implementation [Green]
6. The NIHRC recommends that the implementation of the required amendments to the Minimum Content Order should be informed by the views and educational needs of young people. Care should be taken	Some steps that are assisting with implementation

NIHRC 2023 ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform’ Report Recommendations	NIHRC 2025 Progress report Recommendations Implementation status:
to ensure that engagement and consultation considers the needs of students with diverse gender and sexual identities, ethnic minority students and disabled students.	[Amber]
7. The Department of Education NI should support schools to include students in co-developing and evaluating RSE policies.	Limited steps that have had little impact in terms of implementation [Red]
8. The NIHRC recommends the Department of Education engage with teachers to invite their views on the supports they require to enable them to competently deliver RSE to post primary school children.	Limited steps that have had little impact in terms of implementation [Red]

NIHRC 2023 ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform’ Report Recommendations	NIHRC 2025 Progress report Recommendations Implementation status:
9. The NIHRC recommends that the Department of Education engage with teacher training colleges in Northern Ireland (Stranmillis University College, St Mary’s University College, Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University) to ensure their programmes adequately educate newly qualified teacher in the provision of RSE. The Department of Education NI should also consider arrangements for the continuing professional development of members of the teaching profession, to ensure they are trained in the delivery of comprehensive, scientifically accurate RSE.	Limited steps that have had little impact in terms of implementation [Red]
10. The NIHRC recommends that the Department of Education NI develop additional guidance for schools on how to establish effective partnerships with external RSE providers. This should include guidance on ensuring that programmes and resource are compliant with international human rights standards.	Some steps that are assisting with implementation [Amber]
11. The CCEA should review resources provided under the RSE hub to ensure they meet the requirements set out in CEDAW Committee recommendation 86(d).	Effective implementation [Green]

NIHRC 2023 ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform’ Report Recommendations	NIHRC 2025 Progress report Recommendations Implementation status:
12. The NIHRC recommends that the RSE Curriculum is regularly evaluated and revised by the Department of Education NI, in order to ensure that it is accurate, human rights compliant, and adapting to emerging needs. Regular updates should be provided to the NI Assembly Committee for Education.	Limited steps that have had little impact in terms of implementation [Red]
13. The NIHRC recommends that the Secretary of State for NI put in place ongoing arrangements to monitor the effectiveness of any measures taken to bring about implementation of the UN CEDAW Committee recommendation 86(d) in NI.	Some steps that are assisting with implementation [Amber]

96. The NIHRC responded to the Department's consultation on regulations and also contributed to the Committee's mini-inquiry.
97. The Committee commends the work of the Commission.
98. There is no consensus across the Committee on the right of parental withdrawal, but the Committee expects that schools will engage, inform and consult parents so as to minimise withdrawal of pupils from RSE.
99. Several members of the Committee support the report and recommendations of the Commission and urge partners in Government to continue to work to effect implementation of its recommendations. Some members noted that the Commission did not report on ethos; these members would want RSE always to be delivered together with ethos and worldview and from a risk/harm perspective rather than the that of the health and autonomy of "rights-bearers".
100. The Commission advised that while parental rights are a consideration, a child's rights to education for protection and health trumped a parent's right to respect for religious and philosophical beliefs, as found by the Welsh High Court in September 2022.
101. The Committee notes that the Commission's progress report outlines developments in three categories which may be described as green, amber and red. The Committee recommends that the Department commit to completing work to a "green" status on all recommendations by end 2026.
102. The Committee considers that the rights lens is a constructive tool which allows objective discussion of rights and responsibilities and crucially recognises not only that each person has intrinsic (or inalienable) dignity, but that human behaviour can unchecked take the path of least resistance. They oppose any notion of privilege before the law or that might be right.
103. The Committee is advised that discussion of power dynamics is key to airing and maintaining right behaviour in relationships, particularly if one party has significant social and physical power and considers this a right and entitlement without considering the responsibilities they also hold to respect and protect the rights of others. Assertion of boundaries, communication of consent and respect

for individual bodily autonomy are key learns if our young people are to thrive in their social lives, friendships and in due course, intimate relationships.

104. Among other contributors concerned with access to rights were Women's Platform, Alliance for Choice, National Secular Society and NICCY, who all referred to and sought consistent alignment with CEDAW and other international frameworks for RSE.
105. Alliance for Choice, NIHRC, WPG NI, ICNI based their submissions on awareness and promulgation of legal rights around reproductive health education, equipping both young men and women with the information to have healthful lives and relationships and in due course to be informed to plan futures and family.
106. NIHRC, Women's Platform, NICCY highlighted what they envisaged as a helpful paradigm shift, discussing the potential implications of UN recommendations for NI education policy as very positive in expanding teaching about risk to equipping with critical analysis skills and empowered resilience.
107. The Gillen Review recognised the role that RSE plays in the prevention of sexual offences. Sir John Gillen argued that *"the Department of Education, has a duty to play a positive role in addressing the justice gap that exists in our approach to serious sexual offences"*¹⁴ and recommended that *"the Department of Education draw up a plan to exhort all schools to include these matters within their curriculum and, if that proves ineffective, to be the subject of legislation mandating such education"*.

Comparative approaches to RSE

108. RaISe advised the Committee of comparative approaches as follows.
109. In the EU, most Member States have an education policy framework or a law, which explicitly includes sexuality education or ensures the right of children to education and health promotion knowledge. As of November 2019, sexuality education was mandatory in most Member States of the European Union, except for Lithuania, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Nonetheless, there remains considerable variation in the content, mode of delivery and objectives of sexuality education. Limited teacher training is provided across EU Member States and monitoring and evaluation is rare.

England

110. Since September 2020, all primary schools have been required to teach relationships education, and all secondary schools must teach relationships and sex education (RSE). This applies to all schools in England, including independent schools.
111. Parents have the right to request that their child be withdrawn from some or all of the sex education delivered as part of the statutory RSE. The guidance states that, except in exceptional circumstances, the school should respect the parents' request to withdraw their child up to three terms before the child turns 16. After that point, if the child wishes to receive sex education, the school should arrange to provide the child with sex education during one of those terms. However, this does *not* apply to relationships education or health education from which there is no right to withdraw.
112. The State of UK Boys | 14
113. *"While relationships and sex education has been a statutory part of the English curriculum since 2020 (with direction to ensure it is LGBT-inclusive), conversations about "maintaining childhood innocence" continue to dominate relationships and sexuality education practice. Indeed, discussions around sex and sexuality are deemed an optional part of the curriculum (Morgan and Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2022; Atkinson et al., 2022).*

114. In terms of LGBTQ inclusion, school discipline often involves homophobia for discipline, as described in research where a primary school teacher “jokingly” accuses two boys of same-sex love to get them to stop messing around (Atkinson and DePalma, 2008).
115. Additionally, some have noted that if LGBTQ issues are addressed only in relation to risk (of bullying or poor mental health), it can undermine attempts to identify and speak about broader issues (Gilbert et al., 2018)

Scotland

116. Relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education is taught as part of the health and wellbeing curriculum area of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence. Aspects of RSHP may also be discussed in other areas of the curriculum. RSHP education continues to be non-mandatory in all types of schools. This means that there is no obligation to provide consistent RSHP education throughout a child’s time at school.¹⁰
117. The Scottish Government published statutory guidance on RSHP education for local authority managed schools in 2014.¹¹ The guidance states that schools are advised that it is “good practice” to consult children, young people and parents when developing or reviewing RSHP education programmes.
118. Parents and carers can withdraw a child from sexual health education lessons after due consideration. But if the child is at secondary school, the guidance states that “young people will often be capable of deciding themselves” whether or not to take part in lessons, depending on “their maturity, understanding, and experience”. Their decision should be respected.

Republic of Ireland

119. Arising from a 2018-19 review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools, the need to update the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum was identified as a key priority. This updating work began with Junior Cycle

¹⁰ Scottish Alliance for Children’s Rights, [State of Children’s rights in Scotland](#) (2017)

¹¹ Scottish Government, [Conduct of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education in Schools](#) (2014)

SPHE and is now focused on the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

120. The proposed content has proved divisive, with several parents' groups concerned about the "promotion of transgender ideology" to young students. In contrast, some advocacy groups say these issues are "core to our human identity"¹².

121. The Minister for Education Norma Foley, confirmed that parents would still have the right to withdraw their children from RSE classes:

*"I want to be clear around this: we operate in our schools a spirit of partnership with our parents, the wider section of stakeholders and partners within education. We retain within our school's parental consent at all times for parents to feel that they have freedom to withdraw their students from anything that is happening within a school environment."*¹³

122. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the body responsible for the new curriculum, has noted that requests for withdrawal from specific aspects of SPHE or complete opt-out will require further consideration in the context of implementation of an updated curriculum in which learning in RSE is now integrated across SPHE.¹⁴

¹² ['Parents will have right to withdraw children from new sex education classes'](#). *Irish Times*, 22 February 2023.

¹³ As cited immediately above

¹⁴ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, [Report on the consultation on the draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum](#) (2023)

Part 2

Current Provision

Curriculum Integration and Content

123. Since the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum was introduced in 2007, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has been a statutory component of the following key areas of learning:
- [Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in the primary curriculum](#) (includes Foundation stage, Key Stage 1, and Key Stage 2);¹⁵
 - [Personal Development and Home Economics statements of requirement for Key Stage 3](#);¹⁶ and
 - [Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work at Key Stage 4](#).¹⁷
 - The legal minimum content for each area learning strand is set out as high-level areas of learning in [The Education \(Curriculum Minimum Content\) Order \(Northern Ireland\) 2007](#).¹⁸
124. Issues relating to RSE may also be taught as part of other subjects including Religious Education, Biology, History, Drama and English.
125. The Department of Education (DE) requires all grant-aided schools to have an RSE policy, reflective of the school's ethos, subject to consultation with parents and pupils, and endorsed by the Board of Governors.¹⁹ Schools have flexibility in how they develop and deliver their RSE taught programme²⁰. Beyond the minimum content, teachers are expected to 'provide a balance of experiences'²¹ drawn from a list of examples by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations

¹⁵ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, [Personal Development and Mutual Understanding](#)

¹⁶ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, [Learning for Life and Work at Key Stage 3](#)

¹⁷ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, [Learning for Life and Work at Key Stage 4](#)

¹⁸ [The Education \(Curriculum Minimum Content\) Order \(Northern Ireland\) 2007](#), Schedule 2

¹⁹ Department of Education, [Circular 2013/16 - Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy in Schools](#) (2013)

²⁰ Department of Education, [Circular 2024/1-Guidance on amendments to the Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) curriculum content](#) (2024) p4

²¹ Department of Education, [Relationship and Sexuality Education](#)

and Assessment (CCEA). However, the examples and other resources from CCEA (see section 2.2 for further detail) are not in themselves statutory.

126. The role of the Board of Governors and the Principal is to exercise their respective functions in relation to the school so as to ensure that the revised curriculum is effectively delivered as required by law.²² It is the responsibility of the Board of Governors of each school to ensure that a comprehensive programme is delivered which meets the needs of its pupils and aligns with its RSE policy²³.
127. DE advises that “With regard to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) delivered in schools, Circular 2024/1 provides guidance in relation to the provision of RSE in all grant-aided schools following the Secretary of State’s amendments to the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) curriculum at key stages 3 and 4.
128. Key findings by the Committee in relation to curriculum content and integrations are that RSE is inconsistently embedded across the curriculum stages; there is significant variation in content, depth and inclusivity between schools; and a lack of statutory clarity has led to gaps in delivery.
129. Contributors such as WPG NI, NICCY, NASUWT called for definition and provision of mandatory, scientifically accurate, and inclusive content.
130. Stakeholders such as HerNI, Rainbow Project, Women's Platform, Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice also urged that all schools should address and reflect changing gender stereotypes and gender dysphoria or questioning; represent same-sex as well as heterosexual attraction; and include examples, case studies, etc that represent family diversity.
131. A specific consideration for the Committee is the need to ensure that the recommendations of the Gillen Review Gillen in relation to RSE for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) are implemented and monitored, and as the Independent Autism Reviewer for NI and ICNI advised, that the Department

²² Department of Education, [The Governor Guide](#), (2023) Chapter 7 ‘Northern Ireland Curriculum’

²³ Department of Education, [Relationship and Sexuality Education](#)

ensure accessibility for all students to RSE. The Committee commends the work of Informing Choices and particularly its 'Just Ask' materials in creating structured and supported conversations that assist such young people with relationship and consent queries.

Curriculum review analysis

132. The Curriculum Review provides a useful framework for RSE reform because it argues against both extremes: leaving too much to individual schools, and over-prescribing in a way that removes professional judgement. Applied to RSE, the key message is to **set clear minimum expectations centrally, but allow schools flexibility over age-appropriate context, sequencing, resources and engagement with their communities.**

Curriculum Reform Principle	Application to RSE Teaching
Purpose-Led	RSE should be explicitly linked to the wider purpose of education: helping young people make informed and responsible decisions, develop and individual, contributors to society, and lifelong learners. This supports framing RSE as safeguarding, wellbeing, citizenship and personal development – not as an optional or marginal add-on.
Knowledge Rich	RSE should include clear, age-appropriate core knowledge: bodies, puberty, consent, healthy relationships, contraception, sexual health, online safety, pornography, coercion, abuse, equality and rights. The Review stresses that knowledge enables young people to reason, participate and make informed choices; this applies strongly to RSE.
Continuous and Coherent	RSE should be sequenced across key stages, not delivered as isolated one-off lessons. Pupils should build from early learning about respect, boundaries, emotions and friendships, through puberty and online safety, towards consent, intimate relationships, contraception, sexual health and abuse prevention. This avoids repetition, gaps and abrupt transitions

Curriculum Reform Principle	Application to RSE Teaching
Specific and Focused	The Review identifies lack of specificity as a cause of gaps, inconsistency, repetition, workload and vulnerability to parental pressure. For RSE, this supports a clearly defined statutory minimum

133. The principles of the Curriculum Review support reform of RSE through a clearer, more specific and better sequenced statutory entitlement, underpinned by central resources and teacher professional learning, while preserving appropriate school flexibility over context, pace and engagement with pupils and parents.
134. The most directly relevant point for the Committee is that the Review identifies lack of specificity as a major weakness of the existing curriculum, contributing to gaps in learning, variation between schools, repetition or omission of content, teacher workload and susceptibility to pressure about what is or is not taught. That analysis maps very closely onto the evidence often raised in this and other RSE inquiries.

Policy Implementation and School Compliance

135. The rubrics of policy implementation centred on discussion of how involved parents, teachers and pupils were in the co-creation of RSE policies; whether they had seen or were aware of it; whether parents had been made aware of the legislative changes to mandatory content and the recommendations for education of the Gillen Review; whether they could track those strategic changes to revisions of the policy at school level, etc.
136. Educators also discussed their level of awareness of the content prescribed; their level of comfort in delivery of such material; their thoughts on how age appropriate and suitable it was; and whether they could discuss these issues with school leaders or governors. Some educators advised that they would absolutely wish to have a right of conscientious objection to RSE.
137. The Committee heard that:
- a. School-level RSE policies are inconsistent and often outdated
 - b. Stakeholder consultation varies significantly
 - c. Parental withdrawal policies are applied unevenly
138. Parentkind, CSTS and CARE NI stressed the importance of parental involvement in RSE policy.
139. Parentkind, Education Authority, NASUWT and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine emphasised the need for curriculum transparency and consultation so parents could complement at home what they know their child is learning or about to learn in school.
140. NIHRC, Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice and NASUWT expressed concerns over parental withdrawal rights in the interests of the development of the child, and conscious that peers may repeat material inaccurately or pupils may seek information somewhere else less trustworthy.
141. Parentkind, Education Authority, and CARE NI highlighted issues around transparency and consultation, and conflicts between parental rights and pupil entitlements in the policy creation and withdrawal processes were identified.

Resources and Support for RSE

142. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People reinforced strong support for age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate RSE, consistent with NICCY's long-standing advocacy.
143. CCEA provides curricular content and resources to support the teaching and learning of RSE. CCEA's resources are central so feedback on them is significant. The Committee did not gather the materials of other providers and is not in a position to evaluate them but notes the views of other contributors in regard to these materials, as below.
144. CCEA launched an RSE Hub in 2019 which provides guidance, curriculum resources, and sources to support the delivery of RSE. CCEA has also published the RSE Progression Framework which provides a non-statutory progression pathway in RSE from the Foundation Stage to post-16. The hub was inaccessible for some months during the Committees process while it was being updated; Circular 2024/1 notes that the RSE Hub was relaunched in 2024 with updated guidance and resources to support teachers to address sensitive issues with their pupils.
145. CCEA is also developing case studies which reflect best practice in RSE, and key stage appropriate resources which use terms related to the legislation and health definitions. The Education Authority (EA) will provide training for teachers and Boards of Governors in respect of the new requirements.
146. The guidance states that teachers should co-design and participate in RSE lessons. While schools can choose to use external providers, DE states that the use of external providers should supplement and enhance the curricular teaching of RSE; it should not be a substitute for it.
147. The Committee noted observations from some commentators that materials were in some instances exclusively heteronormative; that they inadvertently imported gendered expectations; or that they had a harm/risk emphasis rather than a right based one. NIHRC highlighted the need to critically check against unwitting assumptions in framing resources, pointing out that for instance, young people and especially girls are rights bearers in relationship, rather than

simply minors vulnerable to victimisation. This example was given to show that another framing of resource materials might instead emphasise resilience and measures to stop perpetration. The Commission is now content that these materials have been revised appropriately.

148. The Committee found that the progression described by CCEA was comprehensive and could be tailored to the age or maturity of individual pupils; and that its resources addressed many of the concerns of young people with very up to date terms such as up-skirting and down-blousing as well as helpful resources for LGBTQIA+ pupils. The hub also signals to schools to check content for consistency with ethos.
149. The Committee commends the CCEA hub to parents, schools and pupils and anticipates that its editors will address the issues raised in feedback.
150. CSTS also described a comprehensive approach to RSE with progression and teacher calibration. The body referred to its Flourish materials which can flexibly be used in an age-appropriate way at the discretion of the teacher and depending on the maturity or needs of the individual pupil; these were created for pupils one year ahead in the RoI school system but teachers advised that they were welcome given that the needs of pupils to have critical information and resources may in some cases span that year depending on the individual and their experiences.
151. NASUWT, National Secular Society, Humanists UK, Women's Platform and PCI registered concerns over ideological bias in external RSE programs; and NASUWT, Ulster Teachers Union, CARE NI and Methodist Church in Ireland recommended good practice evaluation of third-party RSE content.
152. Women's Aid NI advised on best practices for collaboration with NGOs and specialists; EA Youth Service wrote to the Committee to outline a very comprehensive roll-out of programmes; and Invisible Traffick highlighted how its lottery funded programmes to raise awareness of child exploitation and trafficking complemented RSE in schools.

Bullying, mental health and RSE

153. The case has been strongly made by many contributors including the Mental Health Champion, Children's Commissioner (NICCY) and authors such as Prof Paul Downes, that issues of identity which are often the basis for bullying might be better understood and destigmatised if they were well aired and carefully discussed in RSE.
154. Paul Downes made and evidenced a strong point in relation to the fear of bullying; even if someone is not the subject of the bullying, they will leave a culture that permits it as soon as they can. This is a significant observation borne out by pupils not returning to school after covid for reasons such as bullying, and its impacts on attendance appear to persist. He cited studies with large-scale samples across many jurisdictions on the long-term impacts of bullying on physical health, mental health and educational attainment or engagement, stressing that these were education as well as health issues. He also evidenced that bullying at school was not only a child welfare issue but a child protection issue, and such a significant adverse experience as to count as an adverse childhood experience (ACE). He advocated for trauma informed approaches and support for teachers.
155. As the matter had arisen in evidence sessions, Professor Downes was asked about equivocation between ethos and inclusion. He advised that such a position risked allowing bullying to go unchecked.
156. Dr Olwyn Marks' evidence to the Committee conveyed vast experience and understanding of the flexibility and specificity of this area of the curriculum. She advised that *"Within, for example, a school's Christian framework, a school should certainly have the freedom to present its values, but in doing so, it should do it in a certain invitational way that allows young people to consider those values, not in a way that imposes those values on young people."*
157. *The values that I identified, which include courage, humility and kindness, can come from a Christian perspective, but others have those values. That is why we need to think about having a shared values framework".*

158. She stressed the importance of consultation and co-creation to make RSE policy, saying that *“It is through that policy that schools establish what those values are. That provides an opportunity for young people, parents, governors and all those with a shared interest in RSE to name what those values are so that they are embedded in an RSE policy even before there is a lesson.”*
159. The Addressing Bullying in Schools implementation team (ABSIT) advised the Committee that it provided case studies to help schools work through such clashes and has worked up a series of proformas to gather necessary baseline information for monitoring the kinds of bullying that occur. CCEA guidance to teachers also helps support and inform teachers in creating safe spaces for discussion in class, teaching without anger, teaching with empathy.
160. Dr Olwyn Marks again: *“Guidance that CCEA has developed around teaching controversial issues and identifying what those are as regards issues on which people hold conflicting or opposing viewpoints... I think of teacher training. This is one subject area where we need to think about how we resource teachers and others delivering RSE to handle those issues and to teach them in a way that is respectful of other people. That means that teachers or pupils do not have to affirm every understanding of human identity and sexuality, yet they can be respectful of everybody in the classroom.”*
161. *Tolerance and respect are important values for our free society, so we need to think about how we embed those into RSE. We increasingly need to create environments of tolerance and respect for people in our classrooms that recognise that people come with different beliefs and values to that subject as they do to many other important subjects”.*
162. This is a very significant task, and while teachers are central to creating an inclusive environment in the classroom, on a whole-school basis they should ideally be supported in countering bullying by an interdisciplinary team, with for instance the school nurse and therapist. Professor Downes also advocates strongly for 1:1 emotional counselling support as a catalyst for achievement.

Key Findings:

- Access to CCEA resources and the RSE Hub is uneven
- Concerns raised about ideological bias in some third-party materials

Supporting Evidence:

- Conflicting views on use of resources by faith-based and advocacy groups (e.g. NSS, CCMS, CARE NI)
- Call for vetting of external content against educational standards

Teacher Training and External Providers

163. CSTS summed up the balance most contributors saw as ideal when it advised that *“As long as the students are clear that the staff have brought in a programme for a purpose and that they will have an opportunity afterwards to talk about and explore the issues further, that programme can be very useful. In the main, however, it is about skilling up the school's teachers so that we hopefully get to a point at which the vast majority of the programme can be delivered by the teachers whom the students are used to teaching them day-to-day”*.
164. Relate, NSPCC, and Women’s Aid deliver programmes which address specific elements of an RSE curriculum, and schools can plan their offering by complementing such external sessions with class discussions, exercises and lessons delivered by the teachers themselves. This approach can also enhance teacher awareness and confidence so that knowledge transfer is effected every time an external provider attends a school, if resource allows.
165. There is significant recognition of the need for specialised training in RSE delivery and considerable support for evidence-based teacher education programmes, a topic addressed strongly by Education Authority, NASUWT, PolicyWise, Ulster Teachers Union and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, among others.
166. Equally, many witnesses (such as CSTS, NASUWT, Ulster Teachers Union Education Authority, ICNI) dealt with the challenges faced by educators in handling sensitive topics. Therefore, in addition to the need for teacher professional training at college and on a continuous professional development basis, witnesses recommend that ideally RSE should be coordinated, developed and delivered by subject specialists who are confident and comfortable with the material.

Key Findings:

- Teachers lack confidence in delivering sensitive RSE content
- CPD opportunities are limited and not mandatory

- External provider quality and alignment varies widely

Supporting Evidence:

- NASUWT, UTU, and Education Authority highlight teacher readiness challenges
- Questions raised over consistency and vetting of NGO-led delivery

Monitoring and Evaluation

167. Equality Commission for NI recommended tracking the effectiveness of RSE programs and working to understand withdrawal rates and reasons.
168. The Mental Health Champion too advocated assessing long-term impacts on students.
169. CARE NI, Methodist Church in Ireland and Presbyterian Church in Ireland wished to understand withdrawal rates and reasons.
170. As the inspectorate has responsibility for monitoring of both bullying and RSE, the Committee considers that it should be allocated greater capacity and tasked to twin these objectives.

Key Findings:

- No consistent mechanisms for monitoring RSE delivery or effectiveness
- ETI involvement is limited in scope

Supporting Evidence:

- NIHRC and Equality Commission NI recommend more robust monitoring tools
- Data on withdrawal rates is lacking

Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity

171. Evidence underpinning the Jack trial suggests that *“barriers to parental-adolescent communication on sexual behaviours are relayed through parental perspectives that suggest that their religious and cultural beliefs are opposed to sex before marriage or adolescent sex — that would be a barrier; their own embarrassment about the issue or their adolescents' embarrassment; their own perceptions of their poor knowledge and skills in doing this; and a perception or misconception that if they talk to their child about those issues, they may, in fact, be encouraging the young person's early sexual activity”*. (Prof Maria Lohan).
172. Prof Lohan advised that boys, in particular, often disengage from CSE — *“disengage at best and, sometimes, at worst, can be disruptive in classes, actually. They can be somewhat alienated from RSE and, often, we focus it in on girls”*.
173. She advises that *“gender-sensitive programmes also bring boys into the mix and talk about positive masculinity. Culturally sensitive programmes are ones that young people can identify with. In my work here, we developed resources specifically with Northern Ireland in mind, but also the four nations of the UK, so we had slightly different versions for Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales (including for Irish-medium schools)”*.
174. LGBTQIA+: The Youth Assembly advised that over 40% of pupils think schools not sufficiently welcoming and inclusive on LGBTQIA+ basis. The Human Rights Commission study found that too many schools are not addressing LGBTQIA+ issues; gender identity; sexual identity; physical safety; consent; online safety. The Rainbow Project and HereNI also described a dearth of information and discussion in school, noting *“LGBTQIA+ young people in schools have been poorly served and, both historically and contemporaneously, underrepresented within curriculum content. Twenty-one years after the repeal of Section 28 in England and Wales – legislation which silenced any discussion of LGBTQIA+ identities in schools across Britain but excluding Northern Ireland – LGBTQIA+ identities are still being branded ‘controversial’ and avoided by many schools in this region. LGBTQIA+ young people within our services*

(including our Rainbow Youth group in Foyle and the Cara-Friend youth group in Belfast) have told us that their lack of representation into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in NI in education has left them feeling 'lost', 'left out and forgotten' and 'confused, with nowhere to turn to.'

175. These witnesses advised that 2017 DE research yielded disappointing feedback: two thirds of young LGBTQIA+ people surveyed stated that the RSE they had received was unhelpful, with 90% of respondents stating that the RSE they received made no reference to LGBTQIA+ relationships and identities. Research published at a similar time by LGBTQIA+ organisation Cara-Friend found that 84% of pupils surveyed indicated that they had received no information or support regarding sexual orientation or gender identity within their school. At the same time, 72% of LGBTQIA+ youth experienced negative attitudes in school, and 68% had experienced bullying.
176. A majority of respondents to the mini-inquiry agreed that content should be fully inclusive of all young people. A number of respondents including the NIHRC agreed that content should be evidence-based and designed by experts in the field. Prof Brown emphasized the need for experts with knowledge and experience of the relationship and sexuality needs and concerns of people with all sexual identities.
177. CCEA stated that schools should also recognise the diversity of family life today, particularly the fact that some children may have gay, lesbian or bisexual parents or carers, some of whom may be in a civil partnership. *"All staff should be sensitive and respectful of difference, ensuring that no pupil ever feels or is excluded, or experiences bullying due to their family or home circumstances"*.
178. Inclusivity can similarly be a challenge for teachers and Boards of Governors when calibrating messaging in cohesion with a faith ethos in school. Guidance advises that teachers may discuss moral, ethical and spiritual issues associated with RSE minimum content, and some commentators have pointed out that this is worth removing as it may conflict with requirements that RSE be evidence-led; whereas others find this perspective perhaps artificial. For instance, the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) argued that RSE cannot be value-neutral. Dr Andrew Brown said: *"RSE must consider the whole person —*

physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually — and should be taught in a way that respects the school's ethos.” He added: “Critical thinking involves the breadth of world views... You cannot take a neutral stance on RSE.”

179. On a practical level, engagement and consultation with parents and pupils on the content of and any changes to school policies and transparency and awareness raising regarding the strategic aims, ethos and roll-out of programmes are good practice in stakeholder engagement. Inclusivity should also be addressed not only in terms of gender, but with reference to socioeconomic, racial, disability, cultural and other intersectionality.
180. Several witnesses advised that our context is one of collective/intergenerational trauma and requires a trauma-informed approach, saying that this may help address seemingly intractable issues such as bullying. Inclusivity and faith-based ethos can create a clash in labelling, othering or excluding on the one hand and LGBT young person or a faith-based young person on the other.
181. The Mental Health Champion advocated for kindness in not having conversations that required such a clash to occur and spoke impactfully about the terrible and lasting damage such a clash could have not only on mental health but on a young person's self-esteem and security in their identity.
182. The Committee discussed such approaches. Most members advocate, for harm minimisation, teaching without othering as though there is diversity in the classroom, even though the teacher may not be aware of it. Some members felt it was disingenuous not to work with the world as it is and preferred the approach of having respectful discussions which addressed matters of identity.
183. Non-violent communication (NVC) is a method of objective listening and inquiry that can be deployed to depersonalise motivations and observe rather than blame; this is a very accessible framework and may assist in potentially thorny discussions. Similarly, Dr Suzanne Whitten of the Critical Civility Project proposes the use of philosophy tools through critical enquiry to develop skills and habits such as critical thinking, empathetic reasoning and reasonableness in children. The Committee is advised that these approaches are capable of reframing difficult discussions in a non-adversarial way.

184. Youth engagement entails not only space and voice, but impact and influence. NiCCY Youth Panel; Youth Assembly, Diverse Ni, Belfast Youth Forum, Voypic; these young people provided advocacy in the Committee's process and were supported in their work by trusted adults who help them remain resilient.
185. Representation of Activism about RSE: Alliance for Choice told the story of their activism for access to reproductive rights, a campaign that eventuated in the legislative reform at the centre of this inquiry. They advised that they struggle to see effective delivery of the rights-based healthcare messages the law affords. They consider that this is because such messages are not compatible with school ethos. They continue to work to reduce this resistance and improve implementation of the legislative reforms, and they appealed to the Committee to uphold the reforms for young women and for efficacy of the law.
186. NiCCY, Parentkind Dr Suzanne Whitten and youth panels addressed youth concerns about RSE gaps; HerNI - Rainbow Project endorsed the important role of peer education and youth advocacy. Also, NiCCY, HerNI - Rainbow Project, Dr. Sophie King-Hill emphasised the value of ensuring diverse youth representation in RSE policy-making.

Impact of Withdrawal Policies

187. The Human Rights Commission and others explained the rights arguments for and against withdrawal.
188. Throughout the mini-inquiry DUP members have been steadfast in defending parents as being best placed to determine what is in the interests of their child and in arguing that the ethos and values of our schools should be respected.
189. In respect of the right to withdraw from aspects of RSE, the NIHRC advised that the UN CEDAW Committee whose recommendations were legislated for by the Secretary of State did not foresee that a right to withdraw should be granted, in the interests of the social good of young people being well advised and informed so as to access reproductive rights safely and in a timely way.
190. However, it also described the relationship between the right to education and the right of parents to have their child educated in keeping with their religious and philosophical convictions under the ECHR, the most directly accessible human rights mechanism here. *“Article 2 of the 1st Protocol safeguards access to education”, and “grafted onto that, the State, in fulfilling its functions in relation to education and teaching, must ensure that the information included in the curriculum is conveyed in an objective and pluralistic manner.* In *Kjeldsen v Denmark* (1976), the ECtHR highlighted that:
191. *“Parents therefore may “not refuse a child’s right to education” on the basis of their religious and philosophical convictions. Rather, the second sentence of Article 2 of Protocol No 1 aims to safeguard pluralism in education to protect the democratic society envisaged by the Convention”.*
192. Research prepared for the Committee by RalSE presented approaches to withdrawal policies in Scotland, England and the Republic of Ireland. A judicial review of the new Wales curriculum (which does not permit parental opt-out from RSE) upheld the Government’s decision not to do so, with the court opining that *“Openness to a plurality of ideas and the ability to engage sensitively, critically, and respectfully with such debates, which RSE seeks to encourage and develop, fully accords with the aim of pluralism in a liberal and democratic state”.*

193. In the similar case, *Dojan and Others v. Germany*, parents who wanted to remove their children from mandatory sex education classes and theatre workshops were fined and on non-payment, imprisoned. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) said that the classes entailed “*neutral transmission of knowledge regarding procreation, contraception, pregnancy and child birth in accordance with the underlying legal provisions and the ensuing guidelines and the curriculum, which were based on current scientific and educational standards*”, as such “*consonant with the principles of pluralism and objectivity embodied in Article 2 of Protocol No 1*”; and further advised that the Convention “*does not guarantee the right not to be confronted with opinions that are opposed to one’s own convictions*”.
194. Practicalities of withdrawal policies were discussed with witnesses such as CSTS, and the Committee clarified with the Department certain of the arrangements and also the position for home schoolers in relation to educating their child on the newly mandatory material.
195. The Committee represented different perspectives in relation to withdrawal policies and asked the Department to set out in correspondence the precise steps to be taken.
196. DE replied as follows.
197. “*Circular 2024/1 provides guidance in relation to the provision of RSE in all grant-aided schools following the Secretary of State’s amendments to the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) curriculum at key stages 3 and 4. The Circular provides guidance in respect of the circumstances in which a parent can request to have a pupil excused from the new elements of RSE. Requests should be made in writing and addressed to the principal of the grant aided school at which the pupil is registered and identify the pupil to whom the request relates. It should be specified whether the request relates to all of Article 5(1A education or specified elements of that education and confirm which element or elements are contrary to their wishes. They are not required to provide a reason to the school. Where the circumstances prescribed in the Regulations are met, the pupil will be excused from the education prescribed by the Secretary of State. However, the exception would be a pupil in year 12 were they object to*

being excused. It would be considered good practice for the school to offer to discuss the request with parents and, as appropriate, with the pupil. This would ensure that the wishes of the parent and their child are understood. This also provides an opportunity to outline the benefits of receiving this important education and any possible detrimental effect opting out might have.

198. *“The school should retain a record of the request and provide an acknowledgement of it. It is recommended the request should be made during the school year in which the pupils are going to be receiving the comprehensive, age-appropriate and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. Where a pupil has been excused from Article 5(1A) education, the excusal remains in force until the end of the school year in which the request was made or, in the case of a specified element, until that education has been completed. It should be noted that the statutory right to be excused relates solely to the new elements prescribed by the regulations brought into force by the Secretary of State. There is no automatic right to be excused from other elements of RSE”.*
199. Concerns over parental withdrawal rights were expressed by NIHRC, Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice, and NASUWT. A majority of written respondents did *not* agree that parents should be able to withdraw their children from RSE topics and considered this to be a safeguarding risk.
200. ICNI, too, argue that they do not agree with parents being able to withdraw children from RSE as not all children and young people live within safe households, or are involved in healthy relationships.
201. Several faith-based respondents argue that parents should have the right to decide what their child is educated in and tend to support parental withdrawal.
202. Care NI highlight that there is a fine line between balancing the rights of children and parents/carers and setting those rights against one another; they strongly affirm the primacy of parents’ decision-making within education.

203. CARE NI, Methodist Church in Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland among others were concerned with the need to understand withdrawal rates and reasons.
204. The aim of public good and of everyone receiving the same set of standards of acceptable behaviour and expected responsibilities towards others can be particularly valuable in regard to pupils from varied cultural backgrounds. For instance, some educators advised the Committee that cultural differences might be a reason for withdrawal; but there was feedback from BME groups that it could equally be culturally very difficult in some BME families to broach topics such as RSE, and that if pupils did not receive information and guidance at school, they might have no information, trusted advisor, or critical friend.
205. The Committee considers that the Department should seek to collate and monitor withdrawal statistics and the reasons for withdrawal; it also recommends that schools engage in parental engagement to communicate and demystify the materials used and topics addressed, so that withdrawals will be minimal.

Violence against Women and Girls

206. Given that the impetus for the inquiry was legislative change recommended by the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, to tackle misogyny and societal attitudes that subjugate and objectify women is surely a primary driver of reform of RSE. The Executive Strategy on Ending Violence against Women and Girls references an overriding power imbalance between men and women in Northern Ireland, a “*culture of entitlement perpetuated by the male dominance in this society*” which leaves women vulnerable to violence and abuse.
207. Additional power imbalances which may impact school-age pupils include respective age and experience, positions of authority and relative lack of privilege, and intersectional factors that affect social capital.
208. The Committee heard that bystander intervention and allyship work, rights-based concepts of citizenship and responsibilities, co-ed discussion, trauma informed approaches, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, ethics, civics, Non-Violent Communication and programmes created by survivors of violence or other abuse are central to an RSE content prescription that can help change the dynamic for the better in our society. Women’s Aid advised that “*The women, children and young people in our services tell us really clearly that they want children and young people to know the difference between a loving and healthy relationship and the unacceptable behaviours outside that. We want to give them the confidence and ability to draw the line at abuse*”.
209. The Female Voices project drew together analyses of misogyny in and outside school and created materials for age appropriate, co-ed discussion of some of these underlying and damaging assumptions. The Committee has already shared these with the NI Assembly’s Women’s Caucus and commended the young women to TedXStormont. The Committee includes the project report in the appendices to this report and recommends this useful tool to share safe discussion and address harmful myths.

210. The importance of education around consent was recognised by a majority of contributors and referenced in connection with Lord Gillen's recommendations, which the Committee supports:

"4. Measures should be introduced at the outset of the trial to combat rape myths for example, jury educational material, a short video and written judicial directions. In the wider context there is a need for an extensive public awareness and school education campaign.

52. The Department of Justice and the Department of Education should speedily draw up plans for an awareness campaign through schools, television, radio, outdoor and internet advertising specifically on the myths surrounding serious sexual offences.

87. The Department of Education should strongly encourage Boards of school governors to introduce awareness sessions to ensure students understand the consequences of posting on social media.

88. The Department of Education, in consultation with the NICTS, should take steps to strongly encourage secondary schools to include in their Learning for Life and Work curriculum instruction on juries, jury responsibilities and contempt laws in order to encourage greater civic responsibilities among internet users.

181. The Department of Education should address the need to include in the school curriculum for disabled children, children with sensory disability and those who are members of marginalised communities' sex education designed in a culturally sensitive manner on matters such as consent, personal space, boundaries, appropriate behaviour, relationships, fears of homophobia and transphobia, gender identity and sexuality"

211. The Committee also advocates for positive initiatives for boys to integrate them in solutions and cohesion with girls.
212. All written responses share the opinion that adequate RSE is essential to tackling VAWG in our society. Women's Platform state that the EU Directive on combating violence against women and girls does not specify a curriculum, although it emphasises the importance of access to information. The NIHRC recommends that the RSE curriculum should include violence against women and girls as a mandatory component and that this should reflect international standards. The Committee encourages the Department to prescribe such mandatory, objective and pluralistic content to be neutrally delivered within its ongoing exercise in curriculum review.
213. Best practice attested at Committee included EA Youth Work initiatives; Women's Aid NI age appropriate and cocreated programmes. Humanists UK and NASUWT also advocated that like these actors, RSE must seek to address underlying assumptions by teaching consent and healthy relationships.
214. Women's Aid NI, WPG NI, Alliance for Choice, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine advise strategies for preventing gender-based violence and domestic abuse. A child survivor of domestic abuse also presented to the Committee her campaign to help other children avoid the loneliness she felt in school as her family circumstances deteriorated.
215. Women's Aid NI, Mental Health Champion, Dr Sophie King-Hill, CSTS advocate trauma-informed approaches (TIA) in RSE.
216. The Safeguarding Board NI offers a toolkit for trauma-informed approaches free on its website. This notes that, certainly it is accepted that this jurisdiction has its own unique structures, e.g. in politics and education. *"The legacy of the troubles/the conflict has impacted to varying degrees on the health and wellbeing of this society and how services are delivered, however it is positive that we have experienced relative peace latterly. People new to NI may find it a complex society to understand and belong to, and perhaps it is"*. Our past may have led us to cultural reticence and protective ways which impact on young people not as we intend. This awareness and a TIA lens, like the rights-based

ethics, civics and philosophy approach, are tools that can help us zoom out and transform our perception of our lives, challenges and opportunities.

217. Similarly, our past has led to a conflict-resolution devolution settlement, with not only consociational community safeguards but a significant human rights underpinning.
218. The Committee has an opportunity to give young people the tools to tackle their modern problems, and most members consider that learning via a human rights lens is one objective way to do so. Some Committee members consider that teaching respect, responsibility, a faith-based ethos and a risk/harm presentation of these issues is more reliable and do not advocate a human rights approach.
219. The Committee commends a cross-departmental approach to RSE as key to VAWG, working with Justice, Health Communities and others; and suggests that these measures are taken forward within a clear Children's Services Cooperation Act action framework.
220. Regional and central approaches presented to the Committee were welcome and complementary initiatives to school RSE: Teenagers Healthy Relationships Programme – Causeway Coast and Glens Police and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) with Foyle Women's Aid and Mid Ulster successfully bid for a tender to deliver in schools topics such as Relationships (Healthy/Unhealthy), Coercive Control, Consent, Dating Violence, Domestic Violence & Abusive Relationships, Self-care, Sexting & Social Media Risks and Safety Planning.
221. This was in response to need for a more centralised approach to providing age-appropriate developmental support for children and young adults at risk of engaging in unhealthy relationships with a focus on existing and emerging trends including but not exclusively limited to: Child Sexual Exploitation, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Domestic Abuse, Healthy Relationships, Rape, Consent and Sexting.
222. The PCSP wrote to the Committee and the Minister to advise that the programme was evaluated very positively and should be funded centrally and consistently for all children and young adults.

223. The Evangelical Alliance presented to the Committee and emphasised that it shared significant common ground with the range of contributors. It continues ongoing work with young men to counter some of the sense of futility that may make them feel resentful of young women, within its work for the Lost Boys initiative with the Centre for Social Justice.
224. Children in Northern Ireland (CINI) not only contributed to the inquiry but is continuing to work with OFCOM to reduce online harms; consulting young people to understand their experience and engaging with issues of reporting harm online, a lack of reporting for misogyny per se and a sense that reporting is not being taken seriously by social media platforms.
225. ‘State of our Boys’ academic article as referenced above outlines macrolevel ways to look at boys and the various hierarchies they struggle with.
226. Smartphone Free Childhood campaign however had chilling statistics about girls self-harming and presenting with suicidal ideation at A&E – whereas boys may act out their distress in hurtful or violent behaviour, the concern is that girls turn inward the toxic feedback they receive and hurt themselves.
227. NASUWT presented recently to the Committee and expressed significant experience and alarm at the increase of sexualisation of and assaults on female teachers, classroom assistants and support staff. They requested trauma-informed approach in relation to assaults. They described the difficult balance of rights when extending the right of perpetrators to education impacts very detrimentally by retraumatising or victim-blaming the victim of assault. They recommended the whole school, victim-centred approach advocated for by Feminista, recommending its materials and measures for enhanced protection for women and girls in school who had experienced assault and remained in class with boys who had perpetrated assault. They proposed legislation to strategically tackle the harms of tech applications which serve to promote sexualisation, assault and invasion of privacy.
228. Since the Committee finished taking evidence, one of its witnesses, Dr Susan Lagdon, has been made MBE and launched her “head, shoulders knees and toes” initiative to bring awareness to what a toxic relationship feels like.

229. UU ARK have done considerable work on taking boys seriously, with advice that would ideally apply to every pupil, not just boys:

“Educators adopting the ‘Taking Boys Seriously’ principle of boys as relational learners in practice should:

DEMONSTRATE DIGNITY AND RESPECT

- *The educator displays an attitude of acceptance and affirmation, communicating to boys that they are inherently valuable and worthwhile as unique individuals irrespective of their academic ability. The educator avoids belittling, labelling, shaming, and stereotyping.*
- *Key research findings demonstrate:*
- *Boys thrive, flourish, and enjoy learning more when they perceive that they are treated with dignity and respect.*
- *Indicators of success - Boys report:*
 - *Increased self-worth.*
 - *Feeling valued in the learning environment.*
 - *Enhanced awareness of the importance of the role of the educator in their learning journey.*
 - *Improved relationships with educators.*
 - *An appreciation and a feeling of mutual respect with educators. “*

Conclusions of the Committee

230. The Committee was aware that the topic of RSE engages deeply felt beliefs and dearly held values; that there had been disinformation about legislative change which misled the public; and also, that the inquiry might have the potential to help improve safeguarding, protect young people generally and reduce violence against women and girls.
231. The Committee therefore welcomed, thanks and is indebted to the many participants who wished to contribute to the conversation.
232. Certain additional contributors wished to present to the Committee's mini-inquiry but given its high profile, regretfully declined due to concerns around their safety and safety of individuals they work with.
233. The Committee appreciates the work done across schools and by third sector providers and academics to help young people develop a strong sense of self; healthy life skills and boundaries; respect for others; ways to emotionally regulate and resolve differences; and to make a positive contribution to social and community structures, all of which are addressed throughout school life within the school community.
234. The Committee recognises the role played by teachers, family, youth services and other trusted adults in holding safe spaces for age-appropriate discussion and provision of reliable information about puberty, attraction, sexuality, consent, relationships, physical well-being and online safety.
235. The Committee has heard clearly and commends the public service, integrity and protection shown by the community that surrounds our young people. All members recognise the importance of safeguarding when working with children and young people.
236. Safeguarding risks for young people and violence against women and girls are very significant factors of modern life in this jurisdiction, and the Committee supports all contributors to this inquiry in their work to find child-centred and trauma-informed solutions to these existential challenges.

237. The Safeguarding Board NI toolkit notes:

“Northern Ireland (NI) has its own unique structures, e.g. in politics and education. The legacy of the troubles/the conflict has impacted to varying degrees on the health and wellbeing of NI society and how services are delivered, however it is positive that we have experienced relative peace latterly. People new to NI may find it a complex society to understand and belong to. The importance of a relational approach is emphasised throughout the key concepts which inform a trauma informed approach in the NI context. When it is understood why relationships matter and how interactions can hurt or heal, this provides an evidence base and foundational framework to apply a trauma focussed lens to all our engagements.”

Links to Appendices

Appendix 1: Memoranda and Papers from the Department for Education

View Memoranda and Papers supplied to the Committee by the Department
[SELECT TEXT AND INSERT LINK]

Appendix 2: Memoranda and Papers from Others

View Memoranda and Papers supplied to the Committee from other individuals
or organisations [SELECT TEXT AND INSERT LINK]

Appendix 3: Minutes of Proceedings

View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report
[SELECT TEXT AND INSERT LINK]

Appendix 4: Minutes of Evidence

View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report
[SELECT TEXT AND INSERT LINK]

Appendix 5: Written submissions

View written submissions received in relation to the report [SELECT TEXT AND
INSERT LINK]

Appendix 6: Research Papers

View Research Papers produced by the Assembly's Research and Information
Service (RaISe) in relation to the report [SELECT TEXT AND INSERT LINK]

Appendix 7: Other Documents relating to the report

View other documents in relation to the report [SELECT TEXT AND INSERT
LINK]

Appendix 8: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee

Insert the list as a bulleted or numbered list

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