

**Department of Education and ETI briefing paper for the Education Committee  
Meeting  
11 September 2024**

**Relationships and Sexuality Education**

**Introduction**

1. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) should be seen within the wider context of the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) Area of Learning which also includes education on employability, citizenship which explores diversity and inclusion, human rights and equality and social justice. Home economics is also a key aspect of LLW which provides young people with opportunities to learn about a healthy diet and lifestyle and to explore their roles and responsibilities as members of a family and how that may change over time.
2. While there appears to be a current focus on RSE being the only way that people can be prepared for the adult world, the Department would contend that mathematical and languages skills together with an understanding of science and technology are as important. The world is changing and we need to invest in digital skills, learning about our environment and also those basic skills such as how to cook a meal, write a CV or apply for a mortgage or a loan. All of these skills that young people need and are often lost in the conversation. Careers education is also extremely important.
3. Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, sets out statutory requirements relating to the curriculum. Specifically, it provides that the statutory curriculum is a balanced and broadly based curriculum which:
  - promotes the spiritual, emotional, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of pupils at the school and thereby of society; and
  - prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills.
4. Issues relating to RSE may also be taught as part of other subjects including, for example, Religious Education (ethics); Biology (the body and reproduction); and History (assessment of the treatment of minorities in the past compared to now). It is, therefore, important that a school's RSE policy and the content of the programme to be taught is informed by the views of the pupils and parents and is made available to them annually and on request. Pupils should understand how it is delivered, including through other subject areas, through discrete provision or a combination of both.

**The Curriculum**

5. The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, sets out the statutory requirements relating to the curriculum through high level Areas of Learning. Specifically, it is designed to prepare pupils for the opportunities,

responsibilities and experiences of life by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills.

6. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is mandatory for all pupils of compulsory school age. RSE is covered in Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in primary schools and the Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work in post-primary schools.
7. The curriculum is designed to be flexible. It is appropriate that Boards of Governors are responsible for the curriculum that their school delivers because they reflect the views of the community. Our curriculum should reflect the values, culture and priorities of an increasingly diverse society. We know that the profile of our community has changed in recent years, and we have young people from a range of backgrounds and faiths.
8. School leaders and teachers can use their knowledge and professional expertise to consider what is best for their pupils. The Board of Governors of each school must ensure that their RSE programme meets the needs of its pupils and aligns with its RSE policy and school ethos.
9. Schools should have an RSE policy that is based on consultation with staff, Governors, and importantly pupils. This should set out how it will address the delivery of RSE, based on the ethos of their school. The Department requires schools to consult with parents and young people on the development and review of their RSE policy and has re-emphasised and strengthened this in the guidance that issued in January 2024 and again in updated guidance which will be subject to Ministerial approval.

### **Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) Thematic Evaluation Preventative Curriculum - Relationships And Sexuality Education**

10. ETI provided an update on its preventative curriculum evaluation as part of the briefing session for the Committee on the 26 June 2024. The written paper in advance of the briefing session outlined the key findings from the evaluation. For ease of reference, a summary of the key findings is provided below.
11. The report presents an opportunity at both system and school level, to reflect on how the preventative curriculum, of which RSE is an important part, is delivered to children and young people, and how to give effect to the necessary changes to improve provision in this important area. A noteworthy aspect of the report is that it included the views of around 14,500 children and young people across key stages 2, 3 and 4 and post 16 who responded to the questionnaire, providing insightful views on their experiences in school. Two easy read versions of the report for primary and post-primary pupils to summarise their views and the wider report findings were also published in English and Irish.

## **Guidance for schools and engagement**

12. The Committee will be aware that the Department issued guidance to post-primary schools on 1 January 2024 which we have forwarded again with this briefing paper. This follows changes made by the Secretary of State to the key stage 3 and 4 Learning for Life and Work curriculum which introduced teaching on reproductive health and rights including prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. That guidance also covered advice for schools on the circumstances in which a parent could request that a pupil be excused from education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. The Department also issued guidance to schools on 1 January 2024.
13. Since we briefed the Committee on these changes, the Department has been developing additional guidance for schools and EOTAS Centres in respect of Relationships and Sexuality Education in response to the findings of the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) Thematic Evaluation of the Preventative Curriculum in April 2023.
14. A Task and Finish Group has supported development of this additional guidance in response to the findings in the ETI Report. Membership of the Group has included colleagues from Teacher Education Team (Teacher Professional Learning), Pupil Support Team (Safeguarding) and Governance Team (Governors' Handbook) together with the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).
15. In addition to responding to the ETI Report, the revised guidance replaces and builds on previous Circulars and is designed to consolidate all the previous thinking in one document to make it easier for schools to navigate. It is intended to support schools as they evaluate, develop, and deliver RSE provision to meet the needs of their pupils at all key stages. The guidance is designed to be agile and will remain under review and can be updated and reissued if necessary.
16. As part of the process officials have engaged throughout June with a broad range of stakeholders, including teacher representatives, faith-based groups, young people, other community groups, children advocacy bodies as well as education partners such as the ETI, EA and CCEA. Feedback has been included in the guidance.
17. The guidance will re-emphasise the flexibility schools have in delivering an RSE taught programme. It will require Boards of Governors to consult meaningfully with teachers, parents and pupils to ensure that their views are reflected in both the school's RSE policy and taught programme.
18. Additionally, the guidance will provide a steer for schools to explore the context in which sensitive subjects may be taught in line with the minimum content requirements. CCEA is also collaborating with schools to develop examples of best practice which will be added to their RSE Hub in due course.
19. The Department has also taken the opportunity to remind schools that their RSE programme should reflect the requirements of several international agreements including the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child to which the United Kingdom Government is a signatory.

20. The updated guidance is designed to support schools to evaluate, develop and deliver RSE provision, it will include:

- guidance on developing their RSE policy and taught programme, consulting with staff and governors as well as parents and pupils. The consultation with pupils should be meaningful and include seeking, listening and responding to their views. This should set out how it will address the delivery of RSE, based on the ethos of their school. The policy should be reviewed on an annual basis, or more often if required, to ensure that it meets the needs of the school and take account of any emerging issues or guidance;
- the importance of schools as 'a safe place' in which pupils can speak openly about relationships. Where they feel secure in the knowledge that what they say will be listened to and respected. The teaching of RSE should therefore focus on the needs of children and young people. Pupils should have the opportunity to provide feedback about the content of the taught RSE programme delivered by the school so that it continues to be responsive to their needs;
- how schools should take account of a range of factors such as a pupil's age, knowledge and maturity and any additional or special learning needs. The age of learners should be one of the core criteria by which teachers decide upon the appropriateness of content. This is essential to ensuring learners are kept safe from information which they are not sufficiently mature to process. This, however, should not be a reason for not providing pupils with the essential information they need as they develop physically, mentally and emotionally; developmentally appropriate RSE requires the coverage of subjects that are integral to learners' development. However, it is important that schools have the flexibility to balance what needs to be taught in the context of a modern society;
- how high-quality RSE is crucial to providing young people with the knowledge and information they need to stay safe and develop healthy relationships, beliefs and attitudes. It can also help schools fulfil their duties to protect, safeguard and promote the wellbeing of their pupils. The delivery of RSE should prepare pupils to make responsible and well-informed decisions and view relationships in a responsible and healthy manner. It should be taught in harmony with the ethos of the school which reflects the moral and religious principles held by the pupils, their parents and school management;
- how, the content of a school's taught programme for RSE should indicate clearly where it meets the minimum content for Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary. Content should be shared with the pupils to ensure they understand how it is delivered, including through other subject areas or through discrete provision or a combination of both. Sharing the taught programme with the pupils is essential in order to have meaningful consultation with them on RSE

and how effectively it is meeting their needs. CCEA has developed an RSE Curricular Progression Framework which will support schools to develop appropriate programmes at each key stage;

- reference to the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) launched an RSE Hub in 2019 and CCEA colleagues will be providing their own input in relation to this;
- a reminder to schools that they are under a legal requirement to consider the rights of young people when developing their RSE provision. The Department will be reminding schools that they need to consider The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, The Human Rights Act 1998, and the CEDAW recommendations. In addition, although schools are not public authorities for the purposes of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we would however expect them to treat pupils on an equitable basis; and
- exemplars of good practice. As we move forward, we plan to develop more of these to build capacity across schools.

21. The Department is required to report to the Assembly in September 2026 on the implementation of the legislative change introduced by the Secretary of State in 2023. Officials are considering currently how data will be collected. This will include continued engagement with key stakeholders and will also assess the impact of the right for a parent to request to have a pupil excused from education about sexual health and reproductive health and rights including prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.

22. The Department will continue to support teachers to develop their confidence and competence in dealing with a range of sensitive topics, enabling them to deliver quality RSE to our young people. The Education Authority (EA) has operational responsibility for Teacher Professional Learning which should be aligned to the Department's policy priorities. I understand that the EA is providing separate briefing to the Committee

23. The Department also continues to engage with the Department of Justice and stakeholders on the findings of the inquiry led by Lord Justice Gillen into sexual offences, it also continues to engage with the Executive Office in relation to their Ending Violence Against women and Girls Strategy as well as the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy led by the Departments of Health and Justice. So, our work is ongoing and evolves. We know there are important issues which have emerged recently such as misogyny and coercive control and we remain alive to the need for schools to play their part in addressing these issues.

**Department of Education**

**September 2024**

## **Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) Thematic Evaluation**

### **Key Findings of the ETI's evaluation of the Preventative Curriculum**

1. In its thematic evaluation, ETI highlighted the importance of high-quality preventative curriculum provision as crucial to providing young people with the knowledge and information they need to stay safe, develop healthy relationships, beliefs and attitudes and to navigate the complex world around them. Additional key findings are listed below:

- Staff in the schools/centres visited, work to good effect to safeguard pupils, and their child protection arrangements complied with the relevant guidance from DE. Almost all primary pupils and most post-primary pupils feel safe in school and know who to speak to in their school/centre and how to get help if they are unhappy or worried about their safety or wellbeing.
  
- Governors are knowledgeable and well-informed about child protection and safeguarding arrangements and procedures, although less so about the broader preventative curriculum and the statutory content within it. Staff in schools/centres are working effectively to support the emotional health and wellbeing of pupils using a range of approaches. Schools report that the main concern in relation to safeguarding is their pupils' mental health, with a significant number of pupils exhibiting difficulties with anxiety, social interaction, concentration and attachment, and schools/centres report that they encounter lengthy delays in accessing appropriate external support for those pupils who need it.
  
- The Child Protection Support Service (CPSS) in the Education Authority (EA) is highly valued by schools/centres for its effective and trusted advice and support when responding to challenging safeguarding issues and concerns. However, the growing use of social media and the implications for pupils' online safety represent a significant challenge for schools/centres. An increasing number of digital safeguarding incidents, including cyberbullying, which impact negatively on pupil relationships in school, take place beyond the school day. Addressing these external issues during the school day requires significant time and effort on the part of teachers and senior leaders.
  
- There is considerable variation in the effectiveness and range of approaches taken by schools/centres in delivering the taught elements of the preventative curriculum, with significant gaps in the provision within and across key stages in many individual schools/centres. As a result, pupils do not have the opportunity in school to develop, in a consistent or progressive manner, sufficient knowledge and skills to make informed choices and keep themselves safe in an increasingly challenging, uncertain and complex world.

- Too many schools/centres avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE aspect of the preventative curriculum. These include teaching on issues, such as: gender and sexual identity; LGBTQ+; sexual abuse; child sexual exploitation (CSE); domestic abuse/violence; and menstrual wellbeing. Additionally, pupils, parents and governors have insufficient opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the content, review and impact of the preventative curriculum, which detracts from schools'/centres' agility in responding to, and including in their RSE curriculum provision, important contemporary safeguarding and societal issues as they arise.
- A common theme emerging from the pupils' written responses in the questionnaire returns and in discussions with inspectors is their frustration at not being consulted sufficiently on the content, relevance and delivery of the preventative curriculum. Over one-half (51%) of pupils indicated in the questionnaire returns, for example, that they had not had an opportunity to suggest topics they would like to discuss in Personal Development (PD)/RSE classes. In order to have the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the world they live in; they want RSE to be reinforced consistently throughout the curriculum and delivered within a school/centre culture based on respect and personal responsibility. Just under one-fifth of pupils questioned the relevance and effectiveness of the PD aspect of LLW. ETI also found that in areas of gender and sexual identities, just under two-fifths of post-primary pupils report that their school culture is not a sufficiently welcoming and inclusive environments for all pupils.
- The extent, quality and impact of teacher professional learning for the preventative curriculum are insufficient to support teachers to deliver a high-quality education programme. Additionally, not enough schools/centres are aware of, or use to good effect, DE's Emotional Health and Well Being (EHWB) framework and the associated CCEA support materials. The lack of investment in teacher professional learning means many teachers have limited confidence and insufficient specialist knowledge and skills in teaching the more sensitive topics of the preventative curriculum.

## **Recommended Next Steps**

2. Overall, ETI found that the current curriculum arrangements for the preventative curriculum are not effective enough in meeting the needs of children and young people, and many of the issues and challenges outlined in the April 2023 report have persisted for a long time. ETI recommend that all stakeholders, led by DE and its professional advisors in CCEA, should:
  - agree key principles around what makes an effective preventative curriculum;
  - work towards developing curriculum delivery models which are in keeping with the aims of the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum;

- ensure all children and young people can access a preventative curriculum which is agile, contemporary, relevant and useful in their lives now and in the future.

3. ETI outlined what needs to happen next:

- Schools/centres, with support from relevant stakeholders, particularly CCEA, should identify and design how the skills and knowledge required to cope with life as a young adult can be delivered across the existing curriculum offer.
- Schools/centres should be able to provide pupils with access to a well-planned, creative, progressive and responsive programme of learning across the preventative curriculum, which is not an extra but is integrated seamlessly into the existing curriculum offer.
- Schools/centres need to significantly increase the level of pupil participation and engagement to inform the content, delivery and impact of the preventative curriculum and to determine the extent to which the culture of the school/centre ensures inclusion and respect for all. They should also consult more widely with parents and governors in relation to the preventative curriculum and the vision and culture of the school/centre.
- DE has developed and/or commissioned a range of frameworks, hubs and resources. All this work should now be streamlined into the design of programmes of learning which are fit-for-purpose and clearly outline progression in the learning opportunities across the various aspects of the preventative curriculum.
- The work outlined above needs to be accompanied by a comprehensive, high-quality programme of teacher professional learning to support teachers to deliver the more sensitive topics across the preventative curriculum.
- DE, working with the EA and other relevant stakeholders, should ensure there is more regular and effective professional learning for governors to underpin more rigorous governance arrangements for the implementation of the preventative curriculum in schools/centres.
- DE should commission CCEA to review the relevance of the PD aspect of LLW, including the extent and effectiveness of its contribution to the preventative curriculum, and its efficacy as an externally accredited qualification.

4. The ETI report highlights that these issues remain complex and challenging but are not insurmountable and acknowledges that the difficulties schools/centres face can be compounded by the range of fast-changing and contemporary issues relevant to the lives of children and young people. Inspectors are aware of the complex context within which schools are delivering the preventative curriculum in Northern Ireland, which includes: balancing the wide-ranging views of parents; the age-appropriateness of some of the concepts for children of primary school age; and the differing views and beliefs of some teachers, governors, pupils and parents around what should be included in the curriculum. ETI appreciate that the content and delivery of the preventative curriculum can be emotive and is one of the few areas of the curriculum that crosses into family and moral thinking; school/centres need to be supported to deliver the preventative

curriculum in a consistent manner which enables their pupils to think critically about a wide range of issues in an ever-changing world. Guidance and reassurance for school leaders and governors in relation to how this can be led and managed will be required.

5. ETI acknowledged that the Department's work on revisiting the design principles of the Northern Ireland curriculum, which was at an early stage of development, has the potential to go some way to addressing these tensions currently felt by schools/centres.