

Response to Committee for Education

Mini-Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education – Children and Young People

By email to: committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk

About CARE

1. CARE (Christian Action Research and Education) Northern Ireland is a well-established mainstream Christian charity providing resources and helping to bring Christian insight and experience to matters of public policy and practical caring initiatives across the UK. CARE NI has been working on policy related to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Northern Ireland and across the UK for many years.
2. At CARE NI we recognise and endorse RSE as being a vital part of education for children and young people. The RSE curriculum gives children and young people the tools and knowledge they need to make informed, well-balanced decisions. We welcome the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee and have provided input on six of the nine core themes.

Theme 2: Policy Implementation and School Compliance

3. It is vitally important that RSE is implemented:
 - 3.1. *“in a factual way that does not advocate, nor oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception”¹;*
 - 3.2. recognising the key role of parents in raising their children; and
 - 3.3. ensuring that a school’s Board of Governors, recognising their legal authority, is given a primary role in setting RSE curriculum for their school in a way that best meets the needs of pupils under their care and reflects the unique and individual ethos of each school.
4. CARE NI would urge the Committee to recognise that contentious RSE issues cannot be taught in a moral or ethical vacuum. For example, the teaching of pregnancy prevention, particularly access to abortion, cannot be taught in a way that ignores the fundamentals of morality. RSE curriculum should recognise that issues, such as abortion, are not morally neutral and pupils should be encouraged to think through the moral and ethical concerns in a way that encourages exploration and appreciation of alternative viewpoints. It is critical that RSE allows perspectives which represent the ethos of a school, and the views of parents/carers are given due weight as part of a curriculum that encourages critical thought.

¹ Press Release: New requirements for Relationship and Sexuality Education curriculum in Northern Ireland (6th June 2023) - [New requirements for Relationship and Sexuality Education curriculum in Northern Ireland - GOV.UK](#)

Theme 3: Resources and Support for RSE

5. We believe the RSE Hub provides a helpful and easily accessible range of resources for schools to capitalise on in support of the delivery of their RSE curriculum.
6. We note that the Committee has asked for input on how resources provided by external providers impact uniformity of RSE content. We would argue that the current policy is not designed to promote uniformity, but to be adapted to the needs and welfare of the pupils in each individual school in line with the Department for Education's guidance on the role of governors to "to manage the school with a view to providing the best possible education and educational opportunities for all of the pupils" and to establish and maintain the school's ethos.² Indeed, CCEA itself recognises that its RSE Hub resources provide "**minimum** content and are designed to offer schools **flexibility** in their approach to the delivery of RSE. This approach will enable all schools to deliver effective programmes **in line with their ethos** and RSE policy, and to ensure the wide- ranging needs of our young people are met"³ (emphasis added).
7. It is for governors, having consulted parents, to determine which resources deliver 'age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate' RSE, with guidance about how to determine which external resources meet this test, whether that be materials from the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools or other third-party RSE resource providers such as Stonewall or Jigsaw.

Theme 4: Teacher Training and External Providers

8. CARE NI recognises that teaching of RSE can be difficult for teachers and that many teachers do not feel confident to deliver quality RSE. While this is based on surveys from England and Wales⁴, it is safe to assume that a similar lack of confidence exists in Northern Ireland. We encourage governors to provide additional support where it is needed and would urge the Committee to recommend that teacher training should encompass RSE.
9. We recognise that value can be found in schools utilising external providers of RSE, with some organisations providing excellent, high-quality resources. However, there have been concerns raised about the content of some providers currently operating in England and Wales, particularly with regard to information on gender identity. Specifically, a number of providers do not recognise the diversity of opinion on gender, and some have been found to have presented sexually explicit resources which can cause distress to pupils and encourage early sexual experimentation.⁵ It was a vast surge in reporting of this sort of content that led the UK government to initiate a review of RSE in England and Wales, the results of which were never published.
10. **We urge the Committee to recommend that the Department for Education should have robust safeguards regarding the use of third-party resources:**
 - 10.1. schools being given a clear system and the monitoring of their content to ensure moral neutrality. Such safeguards should include for vetting third-party organisations for their viability of delivering age-appropriate and scientifically accurate RSHE,

² Page 1 of "Overview of the roles and responsibilities of the school board of governors". Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/overview-roles-and-responsibilities-school-board-governors>

³ RSE Hub. Available at: <https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse/about-relationships-and-sexuality>

⁴ [Survey on teacher preparedness for new Relationships and Sex Education – The Education Hub](#)
[Half of secondary school teachers don't feel confident delivering sex and relationships education | NSPCC](#)

⁵ See [What is being taught in Relationships and Sex Education in our Schools? New Social Covenant Unit](#), August 2023; [Bad RSHE in schools: where is the evidence? - Safe Schools Alliance UK](#); Policy Exchange, [Asleep at the Wheel](#), 2023

- 10.2. full consultation with parents over the use of third-party resources, and
- 10.3. publication of the resources to be shared in advance of RSE lessons.

Theme 7: Legislative and Rights-Based Considerations

- 11. We acknowledge and appreciate the difficulty in balancing the tension to be held between the role of parents and the rights of the child in relation to education. We recognise and uphold the rights that young people have to education and their right to ‘express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters’ affecting their education and development. However, we note with caution that there is a fine line between balancing the rights of children and parents/carers and setting those rights against one another.
- 12. Both the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)⁶ and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)⁷ 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.
- 13. It is for school governors, **in consultation with parents about policy and curriculum materials**, to ensure that through a comprehensive RSE policy and curriculum, they are meeting their obligations to the long-term welfare of children and young people. On all matters of RSE teaching, it is important to note that the Human Rights Act 1998 requires the State to “*respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions*”⁸. It is therefore incumbent upon schools to take proactive steps to ensure parents are consulted and their wishes accommodated. Schools work best when there is synergy between school leadership and parents.
- 14. Furthermore, it is essential for the conscience of both parents and teachers to be protected. Given the unique cultural context and the explicit Christian ethos of many schools in Northern Ireland, it is imperative that adequate credence is given to ensuring that teachers are permitted to teach in line with their own ethos, conscience and convictions and that of the school.

Theme 8: Impact of Withdrawal Policies

- 15. CARE NI believes parents should be involved in every aspect of their children’s education and that schools should be encouraging parents to do so. **We continue to believe that parents should have the option to withdraw their child from RSE as they have primary responsibility for raising their child.** Furthermore, making this available is an important way in which the above rights-based considerations are practically applied. We note that there may be safeguarding concerns around parents being able to withdraw children from sex education. These concerns can be ameliorated by school policies which enable head teachers to raise safeguarding concerns following a parent’s decision to withdraw their child from sex education, if needed.

⁶ Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention of Human Rights asserts that parents have the right to ensure their children are educated in line with their religious and philosophical convictions: European Convention on Human Rights. Page 34. Available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

⁷ Article 26.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that ‘parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children’ UNDRH. 1948. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁸ Human Rights Act (1998). Schedule 1, Part 2, Article 2. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1/part/II/chapter/2>

Theme 9: Violence against Women and Girls

16. RSE in schools provides an opportunity to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). It is essential to educate children and young people about issues related to VAWG, not only to foster healthy and safe relationships in the future but also to promote a supportive environment within schools. This is evidenced by an increasing number of instances of sexual violence taking place in the school context. A Freedom of Information request by Belfast Live revealed that between 1 September 2022 and 30 June 2023 there had been 132 alleged rapes and sexual assaults on or near school properties.⁹ Within the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2024-2027 there is a recognition that “Schools are very well placed to lead the way in attitudinal and behavioural change, with a whole school environment which equips and supports the empowerment of future generations to develop healthy, respectful relationships and gender equality”.¹⁰ The Gillen Report also supported the premise that the school curriculum is a vital part of reducing serious sexual violence - “RSE within schools provides an avenue for raising awareness, and research suggests that in order to be effective, this should provide an evidence-based narrative that counters traditional gender norms”.¹¹
17. CARE NI believes that evidence from multiple studies has proven a correlation between pornography use and VAWG and its impact on young people.¹² ¹³ The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (2023) reported that 66% of young people aged 14-15 years old have viewed pornography¹⁴.
18. **We urge the Committee to recommend that schools should recognise within their curriculum that pornography is a public health issue** – similar to smoking – and should include teaching on the exploitation that occurs in the making of pornography, the harms caused to women, and the nature of deepfake pornography.

Conclusion

19. We welcome the Committee’s review of RSE that young people are afforded in NI. CARE NI continues to advocate for the important role that governors and parents play in ensuring that the curriculum for each individual school is determined locally and tailored to the best interests of pupils and their welfare.

CARE Northern Ireland | 55 Templemore Avenue | Belfast | BT5 4HP | t: 07772 592029 |

jack.lawther@care.org.uk or jessica.spratt@care.org.uk

⁹ BelfastLive. (2023). “Concern over ‘shocking’ number of reported rapes and sexual assaults in NI schools”. Available at: <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/concern-over-shocking-number-reported-27781158>

¹⁰ Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, Strategic Framework, Northern Ireland Executive, p.29 [Ending Violence Against Women and Girls | The Executive Office](#)

¹¹ Gillen, J. (2019). “Gillen Review”. Available at: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/gillen-report-may-2019.pdf>

¹² Government Equalities Office The relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual behaviours, 20 February 2020, [The relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual behaviours - GOV.UK](#)

¹³ Children’s Commissioner for England “A lot of it is actually just abuse’ [Young people and pornography](#)”, January 2023

¹⁴ Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. “Pornography and censored content”. Available at: <https://onlinesafetyhub.safeguardingni.org/pornography-and-sexualised-content/>