



Submission of Evidence to the Education Committee Inquiry into RSE in Schools

1. Introduction

In November 2023, the following four faith-based organisations jointly submitted their views to the Department of Education's public consultation on the changes to the statutory RSE curriculum:

Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice: is an interfaith community of people who have had abortions or who support the right of others to make that choice for themselves.

Inclusive Faith: is a group of LGBTQIA+ Christians, friends, families, allies and faith leaders, all committed to making NI a safer, more welcoming, more affirming and more inclusive place.

Diverse Church: is a charity that supports LGBTQIA+ Christians to grow in their faith.

Christians at Pride NI: equips and encourages local faith groups to be present at Pride events, sharing a message of inclusive love.

As an intense public debate arose around the Department's consultation, there was an emerging assumption that all people of faith would be opposed to the forthcoming changes. We wanted to demonstrate that there are many people of faith who take an inclusive and affirming approach to sexuality, gender identity and reproductive freedom. We also felt we were in a good position to provide important insights into the impact of RSE policy and practice in Northern Ireland as many of us grew up in homes or schools with very conservative religious values or have supported young people who had this experience. We believe that the experiences of LGBTQIA+ young people of faith should be included when public policy is being made, as the voices of conservative religious organisations are often the only faith perspective that is heard.

Many of us know what it's like to navigate our teenage years in conservative religious families and churches, saturated in the message that many aspects of our sexuality are 'sinful' and that heterosexual marriage is the only valid relationship to aspire to. We also grew up in schools that were subtly or explicitly promoting the same messages, or at best, saying as little as possible. It is clear from recent research that this is not an experience confined to the past but is very much still the reality in many homes, churches and schools.

For young LGBTQIA+ people this experience is isolating and dehumanising, reinforcing homophobic and transphobic exclusion, bullying and discrimination. Young women can also be impacted by heavily gendered religious teaching about sexuality that depicts women and

girls as the gatekeepers of sexuality who bear the brunt of the responsibility to not 'tempt' men and boys. Furthermore, conversations about pregnancy prevention and abortion are steeped in stigma and shame, with little acknowledgement that pregnancy prevention can be a healthy part of safely exploring your sexuality or that abortion might be a necessary choice for some people.

As people of faith who are very familiar with the harm that can be caused by unsupportive messages in a young person's church community or family about gender and sexuality, we wish to emphasise the importance of statutory education providers in providing universal access to unbiased information on RSE. The role of parents and carers in guiding young people's social, emotional and spiritual education is vitally important. However, for some young people the opportunity to access unbiased, non-judgmental, factual information in the school setting could be a lifeline.

We welcomed the opportunity to participate in the Department's consultation in 2023 and would be grateful if the Committee could include the following key evidence from our organisations' shared perspectives in your own inquiry. This submission of evidence is informed by an online survey which we administered to our networks of members and supporters during the Department's consultation last year. All the survey responses are included in full in Appendix 1. Through this submission we want to put on record that, as people of faith, we welcome the long overdue changes to the statutory RSE curriculum and support holistic, comprehensive, inclusive RSE that respects young people's autonomy and supports them with the information necessary to make safe choices.

2. RSE should be COMPREHENSIVE and UNBIASED

Comprehensive means not cherry-picking what you are willing to teach or talk about.

We would like to draw attention to the evidence that demonstrates severe deficits and gaps in RSE provision in schools and we are particularly concerned about the lack of visibility of LGBTQIA+ experiences. A review conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate in 2023 found that these gaps had a detrimental impact on young people's development and safety:

There is considerable variation in the effectiveness and range of approaches taken by schools/centres in delivering the taught elements of the preventative curriculum. There are significant gaps in the provision within and across key stages in many individual schools/centres. The result is that 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.

Whilst we question the use of the word 'sensitive' to describe the normal developmental experiences of LGBTQIA+ young people, the ETI report emphasises that the absence of a comprehensive approach to RSE has had a disproportionate impact on this group:

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: gender and sexual identity; LGBTQ+; sexual abuse; child sexual exploitation (CSE); domestic abuse/violence; and menstrual wellbeing.

The Gillen Review (2019) highlights further the equality implications of an RSE curriculum that is not comprehensive and recommends that the Department 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.¹

In defining what comprehensive RSE should look like, we draw the Committee's attention to the large body of work that sets out international standards of best practice in Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) such as the *UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*.² We also endorse the recommendation of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission that states:

The NIHRC notes that the Minimum Content Order sets out educational requirements in broad terms. To satisfy the requirement that RSE is comprehensive, human rights standards indicate that it must include a broad range of issues including, but not limited to, gender relations, LGBTQIA+ issues, disability and information on harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting. Education programmes should be non-judgemental and should take care not to reinforce harmful and demeaning stereotypes.³

It is clear that information about pregnancy prevention, abortion, LGBTQIA+ experiences and issues relating to sexual violence have been absent from RSE in many settings. The new requirement to provide comprehensive RSE must be well enough defined in the regulations and guidance to ensure that these gaps are not allowed to persist. With the changes in abortion policy and provision in Northern Ireland, it is important that information about abortion services is integrated into the definition of comprehensive in a way that promotes consistency.

Unbiased means you don't try to influence young people's views or beliefs about themselves or others.

We welcome the new statutory requirement that RSE resources 'should not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or

¹ See: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/gillen-review-report-law-and-procedures-serious-sexual-offences-ni>

² See: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

³ See: <https://nihrc.org/publication/detail/nihrc-report-relationships-and-sexuality-education-in-post-primary-schools-in-northern-ireland-a-compelling-case-for-reform>

contraception'. We recommend that this same unbiased approach should be extended to include resources that cover LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences. Too many of our members' experiences resonate with the findings of the NIHRC investigation which found deeply troubling examples of RSE policies that actively promoted heteronormative beliefs about sex and relationships. They report that some school policies express views that could only be described as homophobic:

[M]ost schools either explicitly or implicitly promoted heteronormativity in their RSE policies. Approximately one third of schools explicitly stated that their school would teach pupils that heterosexual relationships was the "main" or "ideal" context for sexual intimacy, with one school stating that it was "the most desirable option for a person's psychological development". Some schools even outline their beliefs that "homosexuality" is wrong. For example, one [school] writes that "the belief that homosexual acts are against the nature and purpose of human relationships will be presented to pupils".

We note that the changes to RSE curriculum do not preclude CCEA from developing curriculum materials for other subject areas that explore the moral and ethical dynamics of issues like abortion, or religious doctrine on LGBTQIA+ relationships. **We understand that schools can continue to facilitate discussion of these issues in other subject areas but agree with the premise underlying the new law that RSE is not the place for moral or ideological debate.**

It has been suggested by some anti-abortion groups that teaching factual information about how to access legal abortion services is the same as advocating for abortion. This assertion is fundamentally inaccurate. **As people of faith with a wide variety of views on, and experiences of, abortion we fully support the provision of factual, unbiased information on the full range of reproductive healthcare services that young people can access in Northern Ireland. Choosing to withhold information about legally available healthcare services would be biased and represent an ideologically driven interference with young people's rights.**

3. RSE should respect children and young people's rights

Children and young people have a right to an education and a right to be safe from abuse. Providing comprehensive RSE is part of the state's duty to uphold those rights. This includes making sure that parents can't unjustifiably interfere with their children's rights by withdrawing them from RSE.

As people of faith, or who grew up in religious communities, we know why access to RSE should be considered an important aspect of the right to education. Across our organisations and groups, we support LGBTQIA+ Christians, people of faith who have had abortions, and those who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence or abuse. One thing we have learned through this work is that the information and messages people have access to when they are young has a significant impact on their lives, well into adulthood. Lack of information about LGBTQIA+ identities can lead to delays in acceptance and disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity, which is associated with internalised homophobia/transphobia, suicidal ideation, substance abuse and other negative health

outcomes⁴. Whilst some parents might not support their child being taught about methods of pregnancy prevention, research evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that abstinence only approaches to RSE lead to higher rates of teenage pregnancy and leave young people vulnerable to exploitative and predatory sexual behaviour, particularly girls and young women and young people from racialised communities⁵. Abortion stigma is a well-researched social phenomenon that is associated with increased emotional conflict about abortion decisions, particularly among women who identify as highly religious⁶. Levels of abortion stigma are high in Northern Ireland and have been found to be sustained by the way that abortion is talked about in schools, where it has to date only been presented as a moral debate and not a healthcare procedure.

The right to education is protected in Article 28 of the UNCRC and in Protocol 1, Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Court of Human Rights has consistently determined through case law that a child's right to education is the primary concern when balancing rights around RSE. For example, in the case of *Kjeldsen v Denmark*, in which the court upheld the state's responsibility to provide compulsory sex education, the judges noted that:

the second sentence of Article 2 (P1-2) must be read together with the first which enshrines the right of everyone to education. It is on to this fundamental right that is grafted the right of parents to respect for their religious and philosophical convictions.

We urge the Committee to remind the Department of Education that regulations or guidance which dictates when a child can be withdrawn from participation in RSE lessons by a parent/carer must be in compliance with this clear direction from the European Court of Human Rights.

As faith organisations, we also want to highlight the stance taken by religious bodies. The World Council of Churches (WCC) is the largest fellowship of churches in the Christian tradition globally and has consistently taken a pragmatic, harm-reduction approach to RSE. In its most recent report on RSE, published in 2022, the WCC states:

Research has convincingly revealed that education about human sexuality and health in general, particularly with children and young people, does not result in increased sexual activity but, on the contrary, leads to protective behaviour. The church has a responsibility to minimize the vulnerability of children and young persons to protect themselves from sexual predation, sexually transmitted diseases, and risk-taking behaviours. School education and a supportive family, and a faith community that is open to discussing human sexuality in an open and informed manner, in the framework of one's beliefs, have a major contribution to make toward this goal.⁷

⁴ Ong (2021) Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8141135/>

⁵ Clark and Stitzlein (2016) Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1203883>

⁶ Cockrill and Nack (2013) Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01639625.2013.800423>

⁷ See: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Conversations_on_the_Pilgrim_Way_Web.pdf

Whilst we support the vision of supportive and open families and faith communities outlined by the WCC in this statement, we sadly have heard too many stories of families and faith communities that do not provide this to their children. **For this reason, we believe that the Department of Education should demonstrate a clear commitment to prioritising the rights of children and young people to access all aspects of RSE through the regulations and guidance.**

4. Conclusion

RSE provision should be based on accurate information, evidence of need and impact, and delivered with a commitment to equality and human rights. These are the principles on which all policy-making should be based and any consideration of religious beliefs should be secondary. However, we also wish to note that the views we have expressed in this submission are not in conflict with the values of our faith. In fact, as the theologian Selina Palm (2019) explains, our ethical approach to sexuality, gender and reproduction is not despite our faith but 'in deep solidarity with its core liberating principles of justice, freedom and dignity'. We want all young people to be safe, loved and healthy.

We urge the Committee to recommend the Department define comprehensive RSE clearly in regulations and statutory guidance, including a detailed overview of topics that should be covered and information that should be provided. The Department should work closely with CCEA to ensure that the development of RSE teaching materials reflects the requirement to be comprehensive. Given the extent to which **external providers** are used to deliver RSE in the majority of post-primary schools, the Department should create a mechanism for review and quality assurance of the materials used by external providers to ensure they meet the new statutory minimum requirements to be comprehensive and unbiased. **A process should be developed that ensures providers who fail to meet these standards are not approved to deliver RSE in schools.**

Appendix 1: Responses to survey questioned administered online to the members of the organisations making this submission.

Survey question 1: How do you feel about the RSE you had at school and the impact it had on you?

It was minimal! The absolute barest of facts around sex, really just focussed on procreation and some more information about puberty. That was it. It was delivered in one afternoon, by a visitor to school, not an adult I knew, and we were sent home with a leaflet about sanitary protection. There was no discussion about sexuality other than heterosexuality, only information on protection from pregnancy and condoms, and no mention of pleasure. Sex is for marriage and babies, full stop. As a result, relationships were difficult and scary, and even once in a committed relationship sex was still challenging. In addition, I, and other children I knew, were assaulted repeatedly by a music teacher who visited my school. The abuse was not severe, but it was upsetting, and left me very uncomfortable, a feeling which had lingered into adult life and impacted other relationships at times. I did not know what to do about this abuse, what was deemed acceptable, or how to voice what was happening. I feel that conversations, or lessons, about sex and relationships in school, with teachers I trusted may have enabled me to speak up, end this abuse, keep myself safe & save other children from the same experiences. But as it was, I had no idea who I could speak to, or how to explain, so it continued throughout my time there.

We had basically no RSE at school and I was pretty much in the dark about all aspects of sex until I went to university. Lots of school friends got pregnant or suffered fro violence in their relationships. I feel the ignorance about RSE left us all vulnerable.

It was virtually nil and left me feeling ill-equipped

I did not receive any. As a result I learned from classmates - much of which was inaccurate or just plain wrong.

The RSE I received in school was very lacking, and what we did receive was very heteronormative and cisnormative. As a queer person, it made me feel quite alienated. In very brief instances where LGBT+ people were mentioned, we were spoken of as "they" and it was very much implied that these experiences didn't hold relevance to anyone present. It felt as though we were only brought up as a tick-box exercise and rushed through. This contributed to me feeling unwelcome in my school, I did not come out during high school because I did not feel I would have been protected by the senior staff if I was a victim of homophobia. The state of RSE and laissez-faire attitude to it's delivery contributed to this feeling of alienation.

It was very conservative. Very little talk about sex - I missed the infamous biology class because of a choir commitment and so missed out on the one moment of biological teaching nevermind the RSE.

It was almost non-existent. I literally missed one day of science in year 8 and as a result I learnt almost nothing about reproduction. What my class learnt in that lesson wasn't much either. I don't think we were taught about arousal and certainly no more than the basics about intercourse. There was nothing else about relationships and sex in my secondary school,

except for some "you can't get it from a wooden toilet seat" type information about HIV! In primary school the girls had one talk about periods. We didn't learn much about boys' developmental characteristics and I don't know if they learnt anything about periods etc.

It was informative and taught me the real facts.

Inadequate and poorly delivered. It left me feeling like sex and sexuality was a shameful thing and that it had dire consequences if you "got it wrong". This mostly just resulted in silence on the subject from adults and we teenagers were left to figure things out from our peers.

In the 1980s we didn't receive any RSE education. It wasn't on the curriculum. Anything we knew about came from home, gossip, books, movies and magazines or the basics of sexual reproduction taught in biology. Why some people still want this same piecemeal approach for their young people of secondary school age decades on seems very odd to me. We should instead be seeking good quality and age-appropriate education for all our young people regarding this very important aspect of life.

It was very basic 50 years ago. 1 lesson in science about the biology of sex. I was 12 and we were all very embarrassed. I first heard about sex from some boys I knew when I was 10. I was interested and a bit shocked. Thankfully it was a safe situation. I knew very little about periods and was terrified about them starting - I was worried I would end up sitting in a pool of blood in class. It would be great to think that things have moved so that children are informed about what actually happens and that they have power and autonomy over their body.

I grew up in a Protestant Christian home and went to a mostly Protestant secondary school in NI in the 2000s. As a young teenager, I began to realise I was gay. I remember being taught about reproduction and puberty in biology class and assemblies on abstinence. I remember nothing being taught in any class about LGBTQ people. There were no stories of LGBTQ people in English or History and no mention of gay relationships at all in RSE classes. I was afraid to tell people I was gay. This vacuum of any discussion about LGBTQ people and gay relationships in school made this fear worse. I had no role models. I feel stigma and shame. I felt that no-one would ever understand me and became depressed. It has taken years to learn to love myself and what it means to be in a healthy romantic relationship. Recognition of LGBTQ people and stories of positive role models taught in schools would have helped me feel seen and accepted.

Survey question 2: What role do you think parents or carers should play in deciding what RSE young people have access to? Can you explain your answer using your own experience?

My own parents relied on the information I was given at school, and never discussed relationships or sex with me. They also didn't discuss what I learned about the topic in school. I wish that my parents had felt able to talk to me about this subject as they could have filled in the many gaps that were left by the session in school. I have tried very hard to provide a more open conversation for my own children, responding to their questions and experiences as best I can, and I think we are doing ok. I am certain that the increased level of RSE they already have in school, compared to mine, has helped. They have some information and language around the subject and are better able to ask questions than I was. In my opinion, in

an ideal world, home is the place for learning about relationships and sex, but we don't live in an ideal world. We all, as parents, have our own histories and baggage and our limitations. With the best will in the world, we won't always be able to answer our children's questions or give them the unbiased responses they need. I think I would like to see psychologists work with educators to come up with a healthy curriculum for young people, which will give them facts across a breadth of topics on the subject of sex and relationships. Learning about these things from experienced, skilled adults in a neutral environment is a brilliant first step. I also believe schools can provide opportunities to encourage and support families to continue these discussions at home. Given that we are thinking about this in the context of faith encouraging family discussion allows parents and young people to talk about how their faith supports relationships, and what they might expect as they grow up within their own particular 'church.' But facts should come first, and every child should receive these, delivered expertly, broadly, without emotion, pressure, judgement or shame.

My parents gave us some RSE guidance, but all within an evangelical framework. The advice was basically don't do it. I think in today's social media age, seeing the bad info that my kids have easy access to online and amongst their peers, parental education alone is untenable. I feel it's vital that schools step in to provide basic information about relationships, consent and the legal options. Also we never heard about gay people growing up. Lots of my gay friends have based up deeply traumatised, bullied. We can do so much better by our LGBTQ young people today.

Both parents and carers have an important part to play. Their ability to do this is linked to how they themselves have been educated in this.

I largely abdicated the role with my sons but think that they were aware of my love and acceptance no matter what. Probably conflicted and embarrassed about my own sexuality, especially in areas like masturbation. I do not think that parents are always the best to deliver RSE or even have a major say regarding content. Ideally it should be a team approach between school (Primary deliverer), parents/carers, and church or religious culture but this will be very difficult to achieve.

I believe that young people should have the right to access comprehensive RSE regardless of the position or opinions of their parents or carers. This is not based on my own experience but I believe that RSE, as education is, should be considered a human right.

Lots. School is an important source of information and influence for young people. Parents should be able to shape that.

I think that parents have the right to know what their children are being taught, and that children have the right to be taught what they need to know. My parents did not talk to me about relationships or sex at all (except in unhelpful, ridiculing, shaming ways). If I had not had the period talk a month before I started mine I would have been terrified. I think it is essential that schools address these issues for the sake of kids like me.

They need to consider the positive aspect, I'm educating our young people in an age appropriate manner.

I think that parents or carers should not be able to restrict access to comprehensive RSE for young people. By all means parents can add their own voice/perspective with their own children, but no child should be denied the full education that their peers are receiving in the first place.

I think openness is important. Parents or carers shouldn't get to dictate curriculum content, but knowing what's being taught helps inform choices they may wish to make. As a former secondary school teacher, I think everything should be done to encourage home school partnerships. There's been a lot of unhelpful talk from some quarters about 'activist teachers' and other nonsense which frankly is not helpful in resourcing schools in curriculum delivery. More partnership from parents, fewer meetings that don't involve supporting teachers, and less talk of opposition to change, please. Help schools to do this really well!

I think children deserve to know accurate information about their bodies. Parents are usually embarrassed and ill equipped to deal with sex ed. If it's that important to them the parents can give their own view at home.

I honestly think that every child should have access to essential information about sexuality and relationships. Parents may wish to guard their children from information they feel is inappropriate or harmful, and this is understandable. However, if a parent prevents an LGBTQ teenager from ever learning about positive LGBTQ role models or healthy LGBTQ relationships, that teenager is likely to come to harm. They may feel stigmatised or ashamed and they may be at higher risk of harmful relationships and harmful sexual experiences. A balance needs to be struck and parent wishes are an important factor, but all children need to be equipped to enter into the world with tools to keep them safe and help them have positive, meaningful relationships should they choose them. This is especially true for LGBTQ children. I grew up in a Protestant Christian home in NI. In my early teenage years, I realised I was gay. Sexuality was never discussed at home and I had no positive gay role models. I was very afraid and felt isolated. I think that if I heard of positive gay role models at school and teaching about healthy LGBTQ relationships, I would have felt more confident in myself and accepted. I would have had less fear, isolation and depression. I would have learnt to have healthier romantic relationships earlier in life. As a Christian, I believe inclusive, compassionate RSE including positive LGBTQ role models is the right thing to do. Faith is not about hiding truths from young people. Rather, faith flourishes in discussion and opportunities to ask questions and hear different points of view.