

WISE IN FIVE – RELATIONSHIPS & SEX EDUCATION

Wise in Five is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (*Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England*) in Five (*it takes just five minutes to read*).

It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect, and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas, and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.

OVERVIEW

In March 2023, the then UK Prime Minister announced that the Westminster Government would be conducting a review of “Relationships and sex education” statutory guidance. An independent panel reviewed “what is appropriate to teach... at what age” and considered whether all content, “is factual and age appropriate”, resulting in draft [revised guidance](#) for England’s relationships, sex and health education. A [consultation](#) on this the draft took place between May and July 2024, ahead of the UK General Election.

The new Labour UK Government has [indicated](#) that it will review the consultation and guidance before making it statutory. Debates around curriculum issues such as the right to withdraw and gender identity are not only taking place in England, but across the UK and Ireland. As such, we’re taking a look at the current state of play and recent developments in relationships and sex education across the nations.

Across the nations, discussions are similar, but approaches often differ. Whether guidance for schools should be statutory, whether it is a mandatory subject for all pupils, whether parents should have the right to withdraw pupils, where and how it

is delivered within a curriculum, and even how the subject should be named and described, are all issues that UK nations take different positions on.

Curriculum changes in [Wales](#) have seen the topic re-named “Relationships and Sexuality Education”, and become a statutory requirement within the new curriculum framework and mandatory for all learners in primary and secondary schools. In [Scotland](#), “Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood” education is part of the Curriculum for Excellence and is a statutory requirement in all schools managed by local authorities. In 2023, the Scottish Government published their own [new draft statutory guidance](#) on the delivery of the subject.

In [Northern Ireland](#), “Relationships and Sexuality Education” is a mandatory requirement within the curriculum. In 2023, the UK Government legislated to update RSE curriculum requirements and placed a duty on Northern Ireland’s Department of Education to issue new guidance for education on “reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion”, which was published in [January 2024](#).

In the Republic of Ireland, “Relationships and Sexuality Education” sits within the wider Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum, a new iteration has been in play in secondary settings from September 2023 following a [national review](#) of the subject. The [recent public consultation on draft primary curriculum specifications](#) which integrate relationships and sexuality education, expects a response report in late 2024.

Across the nations, and further afield, related issues such as digital literacy, gender-based violence, gender and sexual identity and mental health and wellbeing play a part in curriculum discussion and reforms.

The [National \(GB-wide\) Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles](#) provides a longitudinal overview of difference in behaviours and attitudes, starting in 1990. Try this [Open University attitudes interactive](#) page to learn more about the “average” views and how your views compare. [UNESCO](#) works with partners across the world to research and support an evidence-informed approach to learner-centred sex education, with an increasing focus on staying safe online as well as healthy relationships.

Nation by Nation

Wales

The new Curriculum for Wales (introduced in primary schools and some secondaries from 2022, and all schools from 2023) includes mandatory Relationships and Sexuality Education for pupils all pupils up to the age of 16.

There is a mandatory RSE code which sets out the learning for different phases, and statutory guidance which supports RSE delivery and planning as a “cross cutting element” of the curriculum, drawing on history, culture, social and technological influences, rather than being situated within one of the six areas of the curriculum.

The government’s code identifies three strands for RSE delivery: relationships and identity; sexual health and well-being; and empowerment, safety, and respect. The code states that school-level curriculum “must include learning to develop learners’ awareness and understanding of different identities, views and values and a diversity of relationships, gender and sexuality, including LGBTQ+ lives.”

A joint parent claim in 2022 for parental right to withdraw from RSE in the new curriculum was [dismissed by the Welsh high court](#).

Scotland

Relationships, Sexual Health, and Parenthood education is an element of the Health and Wellbeing area (one of eight areas) of Curriculum for Excellence.

In line with the approach of the Curriculum for Excellence, the approach to RSHP is not prescriptive for teachers and pupils but there is published Experiences and Outcomes and statutory guidance, which applies to local authority managed schools (but not to private or faith schools). Through these ‘Experiences and Outcomes’, the curriculum emphasises an “understanding of how to maintain positive relationships with a variety of people and are aware of how thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs can influence decisions about relationships, and sexual health.” Reflecting the government’s ambition to “embed” LGBT inclusive education, free resources and training are made available for education staff.

The 2023 [consultation](#) and new draft guidance aimed to help update the 2014 statutory guidance in line with a “change in social fabric”. Reviews emphasised the need for guidance to “match the current, relevant and age and stage appropriate resources now available for teachers.”

There is a parental (and child/young person) right to withdraw from all or part of a planned sexual health education programme within a RSHP education programme. The current consultation on new statutory guidance does not propose to change this.

England

Since 2020, “Relationships and Sex Education” has been compulsory for secondary school students. Parents have the [right to withdraw](#) primary school students from some or all “Sex Education” lessons, whilst “Relationships education” remains compulsory at all ages. The statutory guidance which supports this (containing information on what schools should and must do) applies to all schools, including the independent and faith sector.

The guidance says that “pupils need knowledge that will enable them to make informed decisions about their wellbeing, health and relationships and to build their self-efficacy.” It makes a clear distinction on the requirement for all primary schools to teach relationships education and for all secondary schools to teach relationships and sex education (primary schools may also choose to teach sex education).

The previous government expected “all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point” but that it is for schools to consider the “appropriate” point.

Schools are required to consult with parents when developing and reviewing their policies for Relationships Education and RSE, and there remains the right to withdraw pupils from sex education (but not Relationships or Health Education). In September 2024, the English Education Secretary [said](#) that “all children should have access to sex, relationships and health education”, but there is no formal proposal to remove the parental right to withdraw.

Northern Ireland

Since 2007, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has been a statutory component of the Personal Development ‘area of learning’ (primary pupils) and Learning for Life and Work ‘area of learning’ (secondary pupils) within the (revised) Northern Ireland Curriculum.

Although it is a statutory requirement there is no statutory government guidance, but all grant-aided schools are required to have an [RSE policy](#) that is “based on consultation with parents and pupils”. Northern Ireland’s Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment has produced a non-statutory progression framework to support “age-appropriate knowledge, understanding

and skills, and develop attitudes, beliefs and values about relationships, intimacy and sexual identity.”

‘LGBTQ+ Matters’ is one of the ‘priority areas’ of the framework, and schools are expected to, “increase knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ matters in an age-appropriate way that is in keeping with the school’s ethos and RSE policy; and support pupils who identify as LGBTQ+.”

Northern Ireland Department of Education has introduced the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland)(Amendment) [Regulations 2023](#), which offer the statutory parental right to withdraw a pupil from RSE. The same amendments alter previous orders, now ensuring key stage 3 and 4 students receive, “age appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion”. The [Circular 2024/1](#) guidance provides support for schools updating their policies to align with these regulations.

Republic of Ireland

Since 2018, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has led reviews, reports, and development groups on reforming the Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum in Ireland.

As a result of this work, a new Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum (including revised RSE) was introduced for post-primary student settings through a [‘junior cycle’](#) specification for first year students in May 2023, and a [‘senior cycle’](#) curriculum in September 2024.

The specification for the ‘junior cycle’ curriculum identifies Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) as particularly important to young people: “As they continue to form their identity, they are making sense of life experiences, information, images and messages about relationships and sexuality... Having the opportunity to think about and discuss relationships, sexuality and healthy sexual expression within a safe classroom setting and with a skilled teacher is vitally important.” The specification mentions sexual orientation and identity but not LGBTQ+ specifically.

The senior cycle curriculum states within the Relationships and Sexuality ‘strand’ that, ‘the learning outcomes should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.”

Wider Primary School Curriculum redevelopment is underway, with the recent consultation integrating RSE into a ‘wellbeing’ curriculum aiming to provide

students with an “appropriate understanding of human development and sexuality, fostering healthy attitudes and relationships. There is a statutory parental right to withdraw pupils from any aspect of the curriculum, including RSE.

WISE UP – 5 POLICY POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

Five key points from what we’ve learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any, or all of the nations.

1. Policymakers should give careful consideration, working with education staff, parents and pupils, to the naming of the subject. Subtle differences across the nations may imply different perspectives, objectives, and content.
2. Relationships and Sex Education can help change and challenge attitudes to unhealthy relationships and violence against women and girls in particular. By including a focus on digital literacy and staying safe online, studies show that positive teaching and learning could reduce online abuse and violence against women and girls.
3. Recent polling in England revealed that children and young people felt that certain issues should have been covered more during RSE. These included power imbalances in relationships (58%), LGBTQ+-relevant information (54%), the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women and girls (55%), and what a healthy relationship looks like, including online relationships (54%).
4. RSE can be a topic that provokes strong opinions and be influenced by misinformation. Policymakers should prioritise clear, timely and accurate information that is available to parents, education staff and pupils. For example, [this](#) leaflet from the Welsh Government, or this [FAQ](#) by the UK Government for England.
5. Terminology, as well as attitudes, technology, and the law, can change rapidly. Education staff must be supported with up-to-date resources and professional development for their own practice but also to enable positive engagement with parents.

	Right to withdraw	Sexuality in subject title	Changes likely in 2025
England	PI		D
Northern Ireland	I	I	
Republic of Ireland	I	I	D
Scotland	I		D
Wales		I	
Key	In Draft [D] → Partially Implemented [PI] → Implemented [I]		