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Dear Committee,

RE: Written evidence to support the RSE inquiry in Northern Ireland.

Please find enclosed written evidence for the inquiry on Relationships and Sex Education.

If any further evidence, clarification or information is required please do not hesitate to let me know.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr. Sophie King-Hill'.

Dr. Sophie King-Hill
Associate Professor

1) Overview

There is a wealth of evidence that supports robust and well planned Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) examples of this evidence is given in this document. RSHE is nuanced and complex and pedagogical expertise in the classroom should be accounted for when considering this. The voices of children and young people should be central to this and be a theme that runs through all work in this area. The conduct of the review requires a robust methodological underpinning and be carried out by a range of experts who can hold each other to account. The sources of RSE for children and young people are wide and varied and RSE in an education setting should build upon this knowledge. Firm boundaries can inhibit what is realistically required to fully support the learning of children and young people in RSE and a lack of flexibility in this can compromise safeguarding. Scaling back RSE would result in long term, lifelong negative outcomes for many children and young people. Good RSE can prevent and reduce child sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Strict parameters and a lack of flexibility on this is proven not to work and results in barriers to reporting and compromises safeguarding and the risk of sexual harm. Good and realistic RSE can create safe space for children and young people to both recognise and report sexual harm. To inhibit or halt education on diversity would be incredibly damaging to all children and young people who naturally want to explore the world around them and their own identity within this. Teaching around all matters linked to LGBTQ+ acceptance and issues is vital and to take this out, or rollback would be damaging on multiple levels. Teaching children and young people about diverse communities is vital for the well-being of all pupils. More training and support for teachers is required. Resources should be provided so that schools can enlist the support of specialist providers to work with them and the children and young people to create a holistic RSE curriculum. It is the right of children and young people to have access to robust and realistic RSE.

2) The conduct of the inquiry

Getting the right composition of expert input and leadership for the inquiry is crucial. Input from a range of academic and professionals in the field is imperative. The ideological positioning of those inputting requires transparency from the outset and the review must be carried out by a diverse set of academics and professionals that will hold each other to account. The voices of children and young people should drive the review as they are key stakeholders and their input in what is required of RSE is crucial. Other key stakeholder input should come from school leadership teams, teachers and parents/carers. The inquiry should have a robust methodological underpinning that will ensure that it is driven by reliable, trustworthy and rigorous evidence. This is vitally important when considering the outcomes the inquiry will produce.

Key points:

- i) The voices of children and young people should steer the inquiry.
- ii) The inquiry requires a robust methodological underpinning.
- iii) A range of both academics and professionals in the field of RSE should be consulted and involved in the review.
- iv) Key stakeholders should have an input into the inquiry. To include teachers, school leadership teams and parents/carers.

3) Pedagogical approaches

Pedagogical experts and approaches need to be accounted for. Resources should not be viewed (still less put forward for condemnation) in isolation as they are made meaningful in use. They are not, and nor should they be, used as stand alone lesson plans that are universal. If these were better understood it would reassure those with concerns that RSE is responsive to what young people bring, not a matter of forcing 'content' on them.

Key points:

- i) The importance of professional learning so that educators are confident and able to use and adapt resources for their settings/groups.
- ii) the importance of understanding pedagogy - what matters is how a resource is used within a given context.
- iii) RSE should be about helping young people to make sense of and navigate complex and contested ideas in ways that enable them to develop and act safely, responsibly and positively in their lives and relationships. It's not about telling them what to do or instructing them on sexual practice.
- iv) RSE is about skill development

4) Sources of RSE for children and young people

Evidence clearly indicates that children and young people gain RSE from diverse ecosystem of sources which include online, media, peers and family. Therefore, RSE at school can help provide an opportunity to bring all the learning together. It is not in opposition to other influences i.e family, rather works with them.

Key points:

- i) Young people get RSE education from a range of sources
- ii) School RSE plays a pivotal role in supporting them in negotiating and making sense of what they have learned.
- iii) RSE is grounded in skill development.

5) Young people want and need to be involved in the design and topics of RSE

There is an overwhelming wealth of evidence that demonstrates that young people are eager to be involved in the design and delivery of the RSE that they need. By doing this schools can ensure that the RSE that is provided is fit for purpose and supports the children and young people in negotiating and making sense of the world that they live in. This can be carried out by involving children and young people in session planning, school policy design and evaluation. Participatory approaches also support teachers, parents and schools leadership teams understand the landscape that children and young people have to negotiate in modern society. This approach works well and ensures that all children and young people can flourish. Children and young people are not passive in their learning and professionals need to work with them to ensure good, robust, realistic and supportive RSE can take place.

Key points:

- i) The evidence clearly demonstrates that involving children and young people in the design of lessons and content relating to RSE ensures they get what they need from it.
- ii) Involving children and young people in the design of school RSHE policy ensures a robust approach to RSE curriculum for the whole school.
- iii) Participatory approaches with children and young people are a key aspect of understanding what they need from RSE as they are not passive in the learning process.

6) Parameters and boundaries in RSE

Firm boundaries can inhibit RSE that is required based upon the needs of the children and young people and the learning environment that they are in. For example, teenage parents, who are sexually active, require a very different approach to their childless counterpart. Therefore, flexibility around RSE is a key component in successful outcomes. Building upon knowledge that the children and young people have and also supporting their unique and contextual needs. Firm parameters and boundaries also can put children at risk as it can prevent educators from responding to urgent contextual needs of children and young people i.e the sharing of pornography. Evidence clearly indicates a need to be led by the context into which the RSE is situated. Not accounting for this can create inadequate learning environments and prevent pressing needs of children and young people being met. Developmentally appropriate is a better way to look at RSE than age appropriate, which assumes a framework imposed upon young people instead of a participatory approach that listens to children and young people's experiences and perspectives

Key points:

- i) Firm boundaries can inhibit what is realistically required to fully support the learning of children and young people in RSE.
- ii) A lack of flexibility in RSE risks compromising safeguarding and may prevent educators responding to the needs of children and young people in the context they are situated.
- iii) Scientific research in sexual health gives us clear insight into how better quality RSE is a protective measure and supports the safeguarding of children and young people.
- iv) Developmentally appropriate is a better way to look at RSE than age appropriate, which assumes a framework imposed upon young people instead of a participatory approach that listens to children and young people's experiences and perspectives.

7) Risks associated with scaling back RSE

As previously highlighted by Dr Sophie King-Hill in a previous select Committee Hearing at Westminster, scaling back RSE, which has been suggested recently risks a range of negative outcomes which is underpinned by robust evidence. If RSE were to be scaled back this would contribute to a rise in teenage pregnancy, a rise in STIs, a rise in transphobia and homophobia, a rise in violence against women and girls, the male mental health crisis would escalate, suicide in vulnerable groups would increase, male on male violence would increase and poor mental health outcomes for the LGBTQ+ community would increase. These conclusions are reached by the consideration of both historical impacts of poor/scaled back RSE and a wealth of evidence and studies.

Key points:

- i) Scaling back RSE would have serious consequences for children and young people.
- ii) Scaling back RSE would result in long term, lifelong negative outcomes for many children and young people.

8) Reducing child sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

Robust, incremental and well planned RSE can be the first step in combatting and reducing child sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people. This is supported by a large range of studies in differing fields. These studies provide robust evidence as to why good RSE can work as a vehicle for improving young people to engage with safe adults in their lives which encourages early reporting of experiences of harm and abuse. If RSE has stringent parameters and/or is scaled back then this will result in missed opportunities for risks and safeguarding instances to be picked up, compromising the safety of children and young people. For example, teaching consent, image based sexual abuse, pornography and personal safety in RSE will support skill development in children and young people and addresses the causes of harmful behaviours and what these look like. Strict parameters and a lack of flexibility on this is proven not to work and results in barriers to reporting and compromises safeguarding. Children and young people are more vulnerable when information, concepts and education in RSE is hidden from them. Robust evidence from a range of fields tells us that presenting risks to children as coming from 'outside' (eg from online sexual predators, strangers, people who are trans, particular minority ethnic groups or even from sexual educators) misrepresents that the majority of abuse happens within homes/kinship groups. The school should be a safer place to raise awareness of what abuse is and to model healthy relationships as far as possible. The suggestions on right to withdraw also risks abusers withdrawing children and young people from RSE, thus compromising their safety. All aspects of harmful sexual behaviour can be prevented and recognised early though good, realistic and well taught RSE. For example, Dr Sophie King-Hill led half of the National Sibling Sexual Abuse Project (references listed in evidence section) funded by the Home Office. This project found that sibling sexual abuse was often contextualised in a dysfunctional family setting and that a large proportion of reporting took place when the survivors were adults. This was due to the lack of recognition of the harm that was taking place as a child. The study found that good RSE can support children and young people in this situation to recognise earlier when they are being sexually harmed – resulting in earlier reporting leading to more positive life-long outcomes. This is also strongly linked to Article of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states in Article 34 that 'Governments must protect children from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation'. RSE plays a pivotal role in this.

Key points:

- i) Good RSE can prevent and reduce child sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation.
- ii) Strict parameters and a lack of flexibility on this is proven not to work and results in barriers to reporting and compromises safeguarding and the risk of sexual harm.
- iii) Good and realistic RSE can create safe space for children and young people to both recognise and report sexual harm.

9) Children's rights should be a key driver

Children of all ages have a right to the education they need and to participate in this with their peers. The argument for parental right to withdrawal is a safeguarding risk, as stated, abusers could withdraw their child. This would compromise the balance of protection, participation and provision rights. Anti-RSE is often put forward as protection rights even though they result in doing harm. The United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child highlights the importance of rights of children and young people in this area. With a particular focus upon Article 3 which states that ‘The best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children’, Article 13 which states that ‘Every child must be free to express their thoughts and opinions and to access all kinds of information...’ Article 17 which states that ‘Every child has the right to reliable information from a variety of sources...’ Article 28 stating that ‘Every child has the right to an education...’, and Article 29 stating that ‘Education must develop every child’s personality, talents and abilities to the full...’ Access to good RSHE is the right of the child and young person as it can allow them to make informed choices as they grow and also protect them from harm.

Key points:

- i) It is the right of children and young people to have access to robust and realistic RSE.
- ii) Access to good RSE is the right of the child and young person as it can allow them to make informed choices as they grow and also protect them from harm.
- iii) The UNRC supports children and young people’s rights and this should underpin approaches and decisions surrounding RSE.

More training, resources and support for teachers when working with children and young people in RSE is vitally important. RSE is a nuanced topic, with some subject areas within it incredibly complex to teach. Teachers should have an opt out option if they are uncomfortable teaching a sub-topic, as discomfort when teaching inhibits the learning outcomes of children and young people. This support should consist of training and resources for additional support. This support can be formed of specialist providers that work alongside teaching staff and young people to create bespoke and rigorous RSHE sessions that build effectively upon the knowledge that the children and young people already have. Teachers and schools are quite often left to bear all of RSHE and they need training and support including from specialist external providers with whom they can work on areas they are less confident about. Evidence suggests that this mutual learning is beneficial for all. More direction and leadership from the government would also be beneficial when considering successful outcomes for children and young people.

Key points:

- i) More training and support for teachers is required
- ii) Resources should be provided so that schools can enlist the support of specialist providers to work with them and the children and young people to create a holistic RSHE curriculum.

Robust evidence indicates that the more education that children and young people receive on diverse groups the higher positive outcomes are for children and young people and there is an increase in well-being for all, not just the minority, diverse groups. To remove this from the RSE curriculum would be incredibly dangerous and have an adverse impact upon the well-being of all pupils. More confidence in the importance of this area is vital as it offers insights into the diversity of children and young people. Any class has a range of views within it that enables meaningful debate and contestation – including of ‘problematic’ views such as misogynistic ones - and one outcome of skilled RSE is to enable CYP to reflect on their own views and values, get a different perspective on them, and to shift towards pro-social norms. Evidence demonstrates that the majority of parents and children and young people want good, realistic RSE and a small minority are failing to consider equity and rights of all pupils. These, instead, appear to promote discrimination often based on partisan belief systems rather than values supporting a tolerant and inclusive democratic society. These views appear to be opposed to choice, autonomy, equality and diversity. These unfounded ideological positions cloud fair judgement on the needs of diverse children and young people and the well-being of all pupils. As an example, , teaching gender is a vital component of RSE and to take it out of the curriculum would pose serious risk of harm to children and young people who are curious with gender diversity being part of the reality that they are growing up in. The government needs to provide leadership on teaching this, with underpinning from robust, rigorous research and evidence in the area. Schools have largely been left to negotiate this complex area individually and more, evidence based, support is required. Teaching around all matters that relate to LGBTQ+ education should be embedded within the RSE curriculum throughout a pupils school journey. This would prevent any slip back to echoes of Section 28 and the adverse impacts that stemmed from that – in which the legacy and negative outcomes are still felt in contemporary culture.

Key points:

- i) Teaching children and young people about diverse communities is vital for the well-being of all pupils.
- ii) More, evidence based, support is required for schools from the government.

- iii) To inhibit or halt education on diversity would be incredibly damaging to all children and young people who naturally want to explore the world around them and their own identity within this.
- iv) Teaching around all matters linked to LGBTQ+ acceptance and issues is vital and to take this out, or rollback would be damaging on multiple levels.

References and Evidence: all of the studies and literature below provide robust, valid, rigorous evidence that supports all of the points made in this document.

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