

# Young People's Advisory Panel: RSE Consultation Response



**Date / Dyddiad: June 2021**

**Subject / Pwnc: Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Curriculum**

### **Background information**

The Children's Commissioner's Young People's Advisory Panel is made up of 47 young people aged between 11 and 18. The purpose of the advisory panel is to act as a critical friend that ensures that the Children's Commissioner's work is guided by the views of children and young people from across Wales.

In the wake of the death of Sarah Everard, one of our panel's Chairs requested a discussion around sexual harassment towards females to be added to a meeting agenda, set in a wider context of how Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is taught in schools. Another member of the panel had also organized a Reclaim the Streets event in her local area around the same time. The discussion highlighted how important the topic was to us and specifically how much we felt that RSE has not gone far enough in the past.

The Children's Commissioner was invited to give a keynote speech at the 'TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION' conference, hosted by Cardiff University, and she requested that the two young people mentioned above join her to present the views of the advisory panel.

Around the same time, we, a sub-group of three members of the advisory panel, met with members of CCfW staff to discuss the RSE guidance out for consultation. We used our own views but also notes from the previous discussion with the wider advisory panel to inform the consultation response. We have used questions set by CCfW as headings for the consultation response and we include our views below.

### **How far does the consultation document support you to have a say? What else might you need?**

*'I'm quite used to reading consultations but I think it's quite wordy and not easy to read.'*

We agreed that the consultation document would work for a professional to read i.e. a teacher but that it was not young-people-friendly. Its main criticisms are the length of the document and also the fact that the language used is difficult for young people to read and understand.

We felt that we wouldn't have known that Welsh Government were consulting about the RSE curriculum if Children's Commissioner for Wales staff hadn't asked whether we would be interested in submitting our own response. In order to know about the consultation, young people would have to actively look and seek it out.

Welsh Government should consult on the curriculum through schools and encourage teachers to either share it with students or run the consultation in class.



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## **What are the main strengths of the guidance?**

We are pleased to see that the curriculum is being consulted on as we don't feel that the current RSE curriculum goes far enough and it is often forgotten about or overlooked. There are several positive features we identified in the consultation document and we feel that it's a new experience for young people who have not done RSE before.

We feel that lots of the overarching principles of the guidance will have a positive impact on children and young people. For example, we appreciate the differentiation between 'awareness' for younger age groups and 'understanding' for older age groups for the teaching focus when teaching about different types of family relationships. Younger children are less likely to understand but will develop this as they grow older.

Similarly, we strongly agree with the guidance that RSE should start early. In teaching it from age 3, you would hope that students would understand a lot more by the time they reach age 16, as they will be familiar with learning about RSE.

We appreciate that the guidance does not discriminate against anybody - it doesn't matter what gender or sexuality you are – everybody is respected. We also like the fact that the guidance is frank and doesn't shy away from learning about gender-based or sex-based violence and other issues. It highlights the need for education on the negative as well as the positive aspects of RSE.

Furthermore, in terms of content of the guidance, we were pleased to see that Strand 2 encourages 3 to 7 year olds to be taught accurate terminology for body parts. We believe all body parts should be named. For example, we all know what our arm is called so why shouldn't be name all body parts by the correct terms?

Learning about body image and the ideas of 'self' and 'identity' should remain in the guidance. It gives young people an understanding of the importance of connections with others and how these contribute to shaping our identity.

The guidance mentions online behaviours and how to keep safe very briefly in Strand 3. We believe this is important as although a lot happens 'in real life', a lot happens online as well, which young people need to know about. We need integration between things that happen 'in real life' and online.

## Is there any thing missing from the guidance? If so, what?

There are key features we believe have been overlooked.

For example, the guidance features making sure that children and young people know how to seek support. However, the guidance does not recommend or advise on *where* to seek this support. Different teachers would have different ideas of who can help and so they need recommendations of appropriate sources of support.

The guidance also begins by stating that there should be a whole school approach to RSE but doesn't go into any more detail about what that is or how to do it. We have concerns around how this will be interpreted by different schools and how sufficient their interpretation of a whole school approach would be in practice.

Similarly, there are no recommended learning hours in the guidance. This is important to include as some schools could spend half hour on an RSE lesson while others could do 3 hours per week. There should be a minimum time spent on RSE included in guidance in order to set expectations.

We also feel that the guidance could be stronger when it comes to mental health. The document mentions wellbeing briefly but it could be clearer that learning about and looking after your mental health is part of taking care of your body and understanding yourself.

The guidance could also be stronger in stating the importance of teaching RSE without bias. We have concerns that some teachers may have particular views or beliefs, and while they might not push their views on pupils, they may give undertones of what they really think.

Finally, we feel that the guidance could be clearer in Strand 2, when discussing the importance of infection control with the 3 to 7 age group. This should not be taught in a way that could frighten 3 year olds and leave a negative impact on their mental health.

## **How else might the guidance be improved?**

*'We had a change in curriculum after students complained. They taught us for the first time about consent last week. They taught us but we didn't have any chance to discuss it afterwards.'*

There should be a focus on discussion-based learning and the guidance isn't pushing this as much as it should. It is important to make sense of what is taught and make sure it benefits everybody.

The guidance should also stress the importance of peer learning and peer-led approaches. If ideas are expressed by peers, young people are more likely to take it in than if it's from a teacher. There's more respect for a peer idea than a teacher's idea.

*'It's a two-part relationship'*

Everybody should be taught RSE together, classes shouldn't be segregated by sex. We feel that although there are differences between the sexes, relationships are two-part and young people need to understand how sexes intersect. We also feel that by segregating classes, it is unhelpful for LGBTQ+ young people and other genders, as they may not have the same experiences e.g. they may not be involved in heterosexual relationships. Moreover, you can't respect other people's journeys without knowing about their lives and experiences. RSE is often associated with immaturity from boys and we feel that this is because they don't learn about girls' experiences and therefore don't have any understanding of it. Learning together will help create a balance between maturity and immaturity.

Finally, more ambition should be placed in the strands for the older age range. Set high expectations for young people in the document – we can learn and understand complicated things and this needs to come through in the guidance.

## **How inclusive is the guidance of all children and young people?**

We are pleased that LGBTQ+ rights feature in the guidance.

Although the guidance mentions that religious pupils must not be discriminated against under the Equality Act 2010, it fails to mention religion and the consideration of how religious values and RSE intersect with each other e.g. no sex until marriage in the content strands. We feel that it's important to teach that people have different views and different beliefs when it comes to RSE.

Similarly, the guidance doesn't speak much about people with disabilities and this may have been overlooked. If young people aren't able to interact with disabled people regularly, then RSE could be a good chance to understand disabled people's experiences and how this links to body image, body autonomy and disabled people's identities. This includes the understanding that disabled people aren't just people in a wheelchair, but that the term 'disabled' can include young people with autism, learning disabilities, among other things.

## **Other comments**

This guidance may not help young people who are now 14 years old – they've sort of been lost to the system already. If this is implemented properly, and works well, then it could help little children who haven't yet started their education.

There would be a lot more respect for each other today if all young people had been taught RSE since they were 3 years old and we believe wouldn't be dealing with a lot of the issues we currently face in school. The discussions held at ages 10 to 13 will also be a lot more informative, engaging and serious if children and young people are used to learning about RSE since a young age.

We feel that to be effective, RSE needs parents, teachers, students and the whole school to develop the content as shared planning and needs them all to work together to implement this guidance.

## **Submitted by:**

The Children's Commissioner for Wales' Young People's Advisory Panel