

Faith ethos loophole risks undermining sex education, NSS warns

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The Department for Education has launched a [consultation](#) on new sex education guidance which will allow schools to teach the subject from a religious perspective.

The National Secular Society is urging supporters to respond to the consultation, which will be led by the former head of a Church of England comprehensive school.

The Government has been committed to issuing guidance on making relationships and sex education (RSE) compulsory in all English state schools since the [Children and Social Work Act](#) passed in April 2017. Today, [writing in TES](#), education secretary Justine Greening said she wanted to make RSE "relevant to life in modern Britain".

The NSS, which is a member of the [Sex Education Forum](#), has long [advocated](#) for age-appropriate comprehensive sex education in schools. The Government came under increasing pressure on the issue throughout 2016/17, including from the [UN children's rights Committee](#), backbenchers and multiple select committees. A former solicitor general also [argued](#) that comprehensive sex education was crucial to tackling "endemic sexual exploitation".

But in a statement last week the Government [said](#) faith schools should be able to teach RSE in accordance with "the tenets of their faith". It said it was "committed to ensuring the education provided to pupils in Relationships Education and RSE is appropriate to the age of pupils and their religious background". It added that faith schools should still be "consistent with the requirements of the Equality Act".

In July, more than 50 faith leaders signed a letter in *the Guardian* [warning](#) of the consequences of "open-ended and undefined" language about faith schools teaching RSE from their faith perspective. They said the subject could be "hijacked by those who wish to overlook topics such as accessing confidential sexual and reproductive healthcare services and contraception, as well as those who wish to limit pupils to what they consider to be religiously acceptable notions of gender and sexual orientation".

The consultation will be led by Ian Bauckham, the former head of Bennett Memorial Diocesan School (BMDS) in Kent. BMDS is a [selective](#) Church of England school which [teaches](#) "that each and every one of our students was created by God for a special purpose". Its [relationships and sex education policy](#) stresses "religious perspectives" on contraception, relationships and marriage.

The guidance will retain the right for parental withdraw from sex education lessons. The NSS has previously [said](#) this "undermines the right of the child" and called it "a betrayal of the pupils attending religious schools".

The NSS's education and schools officer, Alastair Lichten, said: "We welcome the education secretary's optimism and that the Government is finally moving forward on reforming RSE provision. The law is non-prescriptive so the extent to which faith schools can bias the subject will be largely dependent on the guidance now under consultation."

"Where RSE is taught through a 'faith ethos', it is not unusual for us to hear from parents and pupils of schools using the subject to promote marital submission, anti-abortion misinformation, abstinence-only and anti-LGBT+ views.

"It is not enough for the Government to offer their 'hopes' and 'expectations'. They have the power to ensure all RSE covers LGBT+ issues, consent and accurate information about contraceptives and reproductive health.

"We urge supporters to [respond to the consultation](#), to ensure religious dogma doesn't trump children's rights in education."

[See also: The Future of the Sex and Relationships Education Curriculum in Wales report finds SRE is "rarely inclusive and too heteronormative".](#)

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