

Consultation launched on relationship & sex education guidance

Posted: Fri, 20th Jul 2018

The government has launched a [consultation](#) on new statutory guidance and regulations intended to make Relationships Education and Relationships & Sex Education (RSE) compulsory.

As the National Secular Society [reported on Tuesday](#), the delay in bringing out the guidance for consultation means that it will not come into force until a year later than first planned – September 2020.

Parents will have the right to withdraw their children from some or all of sex education (apart from that in the science curriculum), but not relationships education. However, pupils up to three school terms from turning 16 will be able to override this and decide for themselves, "except in exceptional circumstances".

NSS education and schools officer Alastair Lichten said: "The changes on withdraw go a long way to recognising the independent rights of young people, particularly as they approach maturity. But it's not clear what the educational justification for withdrawal is when the subject is taught objectively. In some cases this could put an unreasonable pressure on headteachers, in others it could seriously undermine sex education in schools that don't want it to start with."

Faith schools will still be able to promote their "distinctive faith perspective on relationships", and all schools are "free to determine how they address LGBT specific content" but all schools are "required to comply with relevant requirements of the Equality Act". Schools are advised that: "A good understanding of pupils' faith backgrounds and positive relationships between the school and local faith communities and leaders help to create a constructive context for the teaching of these subjects"

Mr Lichten said "It remains to be seen how much leeway schools will be given in practice, and if they will be held to account for discriminatory teaching. While the guidance is a positive step forwards, commitments to equality need to be made more explicit, to prevent loopholes being exploited by faith schools deeply opposed to contraceptives/abortion and LGBT issues."

The recommended content includes many proposals [supported by the NSS](#), including on healthy relationships, "how stereotypes, in particular stereotypes based on sex, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability, can cause damage (e.g. how they might normalise non-consensual behaviour or encourage prejudice)", "the legal rights and responsibilities regarding equality" and "the facts about the full range of contraceptive choices and options available".

The guidance advises schools to ensure teaching delivered by external groups enhances rather than replaces "teaching by an appropriate member of the teaching staff" and is appropriate, advising "schools discuss the detail of how the visitor will deliver their sessions and ensure that the content is age-appropriate and accessible for the pupils. Schools should ask to see the materials visitors will use in the sessions as well as a session plan in advance, so that they can co-plan".

Mr Lichten said: "RSE is an area where 'working with external agencies' can make a valuable contribution to schools, and we're pleased to see the government supporting best practice in this area. External groups seeking to exploit access to schools to proselytize or promote biased RSE shouldn't be given a free pass."

Along with the launch of the consultation, the DfE set out their response to the [call for evidence](#) which preceded it. To which there were around 23,000 responses. The call for evidence found widespread support for teaching about healthy relationships, consent and respect. While the "most frequently mentioned topic of consultation" was "the potential for PSHE and RSE teaching to conflict with religious views" – mentioned by 22% of respondents. The DfE's analysis also stated that "adult respondents who identify as Muslim or Jewish are overrepresented in the responses, whereas those identifying as Christian are under-represented."

In their response to the call for evidence, the NSS warned that a "strand of fearmongering runs through" misinformation circulated by some faith groups hostile to the changes, "along with a lack of concern for young people's rights and the arrogant assumption that faith schools should be free to advance dogma, without any concern for equality or accuracy."

[The consultation is now open \(closed Wednesday 7 November 2018\)](#)

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