

## **INFORMING CHOICES NI**

### **RESPONSE TO THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION (RSE)**

**OCTOBER 2024**

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#### **Introduction**

Informing Choices NI (ICNI) are a sexual and reproductive health charity. Our vision is a society where individuals have the right and freedom to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health.

ICNI have a long history (formerly as the Family Planning Association in Northern Ireland) of delivering award winning education programmes.

Our Just Ask project is a unique regional RSE programme that works specifically with individuals with a learning disability and autistic people, as well as their parents and guardians. This programme won the Making a Difference (Team) Award at the National Learning Disabilities and Autism Awards 2023.

Our Speakeasy programme encourages parents and guardians to engage confidently with their children and young people about a wide range of issues surrounding relationships and sexuality.

ICNI also deliver RSE training for professionals, which is accredited by Open College Network NI. We believe that training is essential for any individual who wants to play a positive role in the choices people make by giving them factual, non-judgmental and non-directive information.

ICNI welcomes the Committee for Education's focus on RSE, and we appreciate the opportunity to share our expertise on this issue.

## **RSE - Our Views**

ICNI believe that all children and young people should have access to age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate RSE in schools.

While recent changes to the provision of RSE focuses on adolescents, it is vital that the curriculum continues to develop, and provides age-appropriate information and learning for children of all ages.

By beginning RSE at a young age, children learn to talk about feelings and relationships, and are prepared for puberty before it occurs. They can then also understand and challenge any misinformation and stereotypes that they may encounter in the future.

Comprehensive RSE develops confidence and resilience in all aspects of a young person's life. It equips them with the knowledge to recognise abuse; provides information about forming positive relationships; and gives clarity around giving and withdrawing sexual consent.

ICNI promote positive attitudes around sex and sexuality. We believe that RSE should be inclusive, and facilitated by trainers who are confident in talking about all issues relevant to the subject.

It is our experience that pupils will have pre-informed values around issues covered within RSE, including reproductive choices and LGBTQ+ matters, before they enter the classroom.

Facilitators guiding conversations within RSE lessons must be non-directive, and enable open, honest, and respectful discussions. In doing so they should be mindful of all opinions, and the personal circumstances of pupils.

The purpose of the conversation should not be to change anyone's personal values, but to give factual and accessible information, to enable young people to make informed choices.

While external providers may play a role in assisting schools with the delivery of certain aspects of the RSE curriculum, this should be to enhance the provision of RSE within schools, rather than replace it.

ICNI believe there should be a standardised RSE curriculum across all schools in Northern Ireland, which enables open conversations with children and young people.

We also believe that RSE Awareness Training should be provided to all teaching staff to create a conducive environment within schools where young people feel safer to talk with teachers about issues that can be seen as sensitive, in the knowledge that the teacher is comfortable with the subject and is there to provide support and information in a non-directive and non-judgmental manner.

ICNI acknowledge that some parents have fears and concerns around the teaching of RSE. This is understandable, as many adults received little, or no formal education in this area and grew up in a society where sex and sexuality were viewed as taboo topics.

Therefore, some will find it embarrassing and uncomfortable when talking to their children and young people about these issues. However, it is important for parents to acknowledge that the source of their fears belong to them, and not their children.

Some parents may be hindered by gaps in their knowledge, and require additional support, and some may be opposed to aspects of the RSE curriculum because of their deeply held values and beliefs.

While a small minority of parents do not support the teaching of RSE, we believe children and young people have the right to high-quality, comprehensive RSE, which promotes good sexual health and equal and enjoyable relationships. This should be free from the prospect of educational exclusion. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child agree.

In their Concluding Observations to the UK Government, the Committee recommended that the State Party:

*“Integrate comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based education on sexual and reproductive health into mandatory school curricula at all levels of education and into teacher training and ensure that it includes education on sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible sexual behaviour and violence prevention, without the possibility for faith-based schools or parents to opt out of such education.” (UNCRC, 2023)*

ICNI believe that a framework which pits schools against parents, and parents against children, is not a conducive environment within which to provide RSE. We would also highlight that children and young people are living in a society which is alien to the one that many of their parents were born into.

Advances in technology mean that they now have access to vast amounts of information at the click of a button. While this has many positives for education and social connections, young people are also more susceptible to the provision of misinformation, including developing distorted beliefs and perceptions about relationships through pornography, and encountering negative views pertaining to masculinity from harmful social media influencers.

By excluding young people from RSE, they will be denied opportunities to be exposed to factual information, and for inaccurate perceptions to be challenged.

It should also be noted that not all children and young people live within safe households, or are involved in healthy relationships. As part of RSE they will receive information to enable them to recognise abuse, identify the qualities they should expect from positive relationships, and informed about giving and withdrawing sexual consent.

ICNI do believe that parents should be informed of the specific nature and content of the RSE curriculum that their child will receive, and that resources should be made available to them. This will aid them in providing RSE at home, and reinforce the positive messages from the classroom.

Engaging parents with the curriculum also assists to identify their needs, hopes, and concerns, while alleviating their fears. To do this effectively, schools should be supported to develop resources to support parents and guardians, and consider offering RSE programmes to them.

ICNI also believe that schools should involve both pupils and parents in the development of their RSE policy, and that the provision of this subject should be included as part of a school's inspection.

## RSE – Our Programmes

Individuals with a learning disability and autistic people have the same rights as everyone to high-quality RSE. Our Just Ask project is a unique regional RSE programme that works specifically with individuals with a learning disability and autistic people, as well as their parents and guardians.

The project has been in existence since 2006, is funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA), and highlights the need for consistent, fact based RSE programmes. Just Ask is an award winning RSE programme, which exceeds its PHA targets on a yearly basis, yet still continually operates a waiting list for programmes. In 2023/24 we delivered 305 sessions, to 423 individuals.

An RSE programme is more than sex and sexual health, although these are important areas that should be covered. Our Just Ask programme seeks to build the individual's relationship with themselves, and develop their confidence and self-esteem, before moving on to topic-based work.

Just Ask has five key areas that begin any RSE programme, regardless of the age or ability of the participants. These are:

- Personal space;
- Boundaries;
- Permission;
- Consent; and
- Choice.

These develop an individual's understanding that we all have rights around choice, a say in who is in our personal space, that we need permission and consent to be in others personal space, that these choices are the individual's alone, and that how you choose who is in your personal space is down to why they need to be there.

ICNI believe that if an individual has a clear understanding of these five key areas, then they can be built on to cover any RSE topic.

Topics covered within sessions range from discussions around puberty, to sexual abuse. From our experience, young people with a learning disability and autistic young people often do not have the language to communicate abuse.

The Just Ask programme normalises the use of correct names for body parts, reinforces personal space and consent messaging, gives young people the confidence to say when something has happened to them, and provides the confidence to say no and seek support if asked to do something they do not want to do.

*“Thank you for listening to me and for answering my questions. Talking with you has helped me grow in confidence and I think that was a big part of my problem, I had no confidence.” – Just Ask participant*

*“When we know how our bodies work, we can take care of them better. I learnt about how my body would change as I got older and it made me feel better to know I wasn’t the only one.” – Just Ask participant*

From our experience the consequences of not receiving fact based RSE range from confusion and anxiety around body changes, including menstruation, to individuals making unhealthy relationship choices or being involved in inappropriate touch due to not fully understanding what is and isn’t appropriate, as well as the potential consequences of their actions.

ICNI often receive urgent referrals from social workers regarding individuals who are beyond school age and who have put themselves or someone else at risk due to their lack of knowledge around key issues pertaining to RSE.

Before starting a programme within a school ICNI will arrange a meeting to discuss the Just Ask project. This may also involve meeting with their Board of Governors. We will provide an outline of the programme, and reinforce the need for the school to have an RSE policy if one is not already in place.

We can adapt our programme to include specific areas that the school would like us to focus on, and modify the delivery style to best meet the needs of the pupils. While sessions will focus on specific topics, we believe that RSE should be an open conversation, and will address any issues raised by participants.

From our experience of working within Special Educational Needs Schools, teachers are usually willing to embrace RSE as a subject and accept that the young people they work with need to learn about relationships, sex, and sexuality, and how to make informed choices.

Teachers have stated that they accept and understand the young people they work with have wants, needs and desires, personal and sexual, the same as every other young person and should have the right to express these.

They have also expressed concerns regarding certain actions by pupils within school settings ranging from inappropriate language to inappropriate touch, and their lack of understanding around the consequences of their actions.

However, teachers often reference their lack the skills and knowledge to teach these subjects, either in part, or in full which leaves them unsure of how they should deliver an RSE programme, and what resources they should use.

Teachers also state that they seldom have an opportunity to talk about their values and attitudes around RSE, and how their fears and concerns are often not considered.

To address this ICNI deliver RSE Awareness training which provides an opportunity for professionals to examine and reflect on their own personal views, and how to balance these with the subjects that they teach. Feedback from teachers who have attended our training is included below:

*“When he broke it down into the fundamental 5 points it definitely made me feel more confident/comfortable in the idea of talking and discussing if questions come to me from our young people. Before this in a school setting, I would have very much felt uncomfortable and scared to say the wrong thing.”*

*“The training was humorous and entertaining yet also raw and hard hitting in educating us on the importance of RSE and how to deliver it to our children/young people as well as the consequences that can happen if not.”*

*“Was very interesting and thought provoking. Broke the ice in terms of awkwardness around language. Feel more comfortable with staff around this topic. I learnt just how important it is to be speaking about this topic with the children in our school.”*

*“I was really impressed that it wasn’t afraid to be addressed! First time I’ve ever had any proper training on the topic.”*

*“Was useful as a reminder we need to start with the basics before progressing further making sure pupils fully understand what’s being discussed.”*

*“Really amazing!!! I didn’t realise that even as an adult staff school, we didn’t know how to explain or talk about our body parts.”*

ICNI have also developed our own resources including an [animation](#) regarding sexual consent specifically for individuals with a learning disability and autistic people, and a comic based around the character Bubble Bear which focuses on personal space.

ICNI also recognise that parents and guardians have unique knowledge about their children, and as an organisation we seek to establish a partnership approach when engaging with them around RSE.

It is our experience that when schools actively engage parents in discussions around RSE, they can provide a better understanding of its context, and alleviate any potential concerns. This leads to a more positive environment for parents, teachers, and pupils.

Every school that requests Just Ask is also offered a parent’s programme. All parents are provided with an outline of the topics covered, and provided with activities that their young people will be working on in school. We also inform schools that if parents have any concerns regarding the programme content, that they can contact ICNI to discuss this further.

Parents who have taken part in our programmes have never withdrawn their young person from a Just Ask programme, and have stated that they found it to be very beneficial in enabling them to better support their young person at home.

Occasionally when ICNI attend a school there will be one or two young people who are told that they must leave the class. The young people usually seem a bit put out that they are not doing the same activities as the rest of their classmates.

However, pupil exclusion has happened less in recent years because of the support offered to parents, and the transparency ICNI provide regarding the programme content.



ICNI's parent work extends beyond Just Ask. Our Speakeasy project supports parent-child communications around sexuality and relationships.

ICNI are aware that children and young people want to discuss topics relating to RSE with the people they feel close too. Therefore, Speakeasy gives parents, guardians, grandparents, and foster carers the opportunity to openly communicate about growing-up, puberty, sexual consent, sexuality, and identity, and develop strong relationship skills.

The programme is funded by the Public Health Agency in the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust areas. In 2023/24 we delivered 118 sessions, to 186 individuals and is highly recommended by parents and teachers:

*"I thought my kids were way too young for me to be thinking about talking to them about sex. I didn't realise how much more there was to it than that. I'm so glad I came along to this group. I'm starting to talk to them just about their bodies and about their choices." - Parent*

*"I really appreciate hearing about what is age-appropriate. I get so nervous when my daughter asks questions like 'Where did I come from?' that I end up making jokes about it and not actually answering her. I feel a lot more confident now." - Parent*

*"Today, more than ever, parents and guardians are crying out for support around RSE. When our school advertised that we would host two Speakeasy programmes, both were filled within an hour. Parents and guardians are sometimes nervous and anxious about RSE but the Speakeasy programme supported them with understanding how to talk to their children in an age-appropriate way and helped to reassure them that others are in the same boat as them. The parents and guardians grew in confidence and their anxieties and fears were substantially reduced." – School Principal*

ICNI has also developed a Speakeasy [animation](#) focused on parent-child dialogue and having open conversations around sexual and reproductive health.

## **RSE - Reports and surveys**

Prior to the introduction of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, a survey commissioned by ICNI and conducted by Savanta ComRes highlighted that only 17% of MLAs believed RSE in schools was “*satisfactory*” (ICNI, 2022).

Results showed that 78% agreed that there should be a standardised curriculum used in all schools, regardless of their ethos. 62% agreed that children and young people should be taught about different family types, and 60% agreed that information regarding the availability of contraception and access to abortion should be included within the RSE curriculum in all post-primary schools.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) published a Thematic Evaluation of the Preventative Curriculum in Northern Ireland (ETI, 2023). The report was based on responses from more than 14,500 primary and post-primary pupils, and 500 schools.

It found that there was considerable variation in the teaching of RSE, and highlighted that there was a lack of lessons on topics such as contraception, pregnancy, abortion, transgender issues, and menstrual health and wellbeing.

Despite the recommendations contained within the Gillen Review regarding the teaching of consent (Department of Justice, 2019), 44% of schools reported that they were delivering the topic to a small extent, or not at all.

When asked what topics they wanted to learn more about, post-primary pupils raised issues such as sex, consent and sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, contraception and STIs, and abortion.

In relation to improving the standard of the RSE curriculum, post-primary pupils wanted more discussion, rather than long presentations, and a variety of topics covered each year. They felt the content was too heteronormative, and believed that the subject should not be taught through the lens of the church. They also believed that boys and girls should not be separated during these lessons.

Only 19% (n=1301) of year 14 pupils surveyed believed that Learning for Life and Work (LLW) had equipped them to make informed and responsible decisions. Similarly, the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland published a report in December 2023 entitled '*Let Us Learn*', in which they reported that 73% of young people who responded to their survey do not believe they have received adequate LLW education (SSUNI, 2023).

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) published a report on RSE in Post Primary Schools (NIHRC, 2023). This followed an investigation during which they appointed independent experts to assist in their assessment of the provision of the subject.

The experts noted that the guidance produced by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) in 2019 recommends that school policies include references to sections of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

They stated that this demonstrated a clear intent of the CCEA and the Department of Education for schools to promote the human rights of young people. However, they concluded that:

*"Much guidance appeared to imagine the student to be passive and deficient – unknowledgeable, potentially reckless, in need of protection from bullying, peer pressure, media influence, of guidance in moral values that they are assumed to lack. Where they were considered as 'responsible' this was often conceived in punitive terms about accepting consequences of sexual activity, such as parenthood. Too rarely was the child imagined as a rights-bearer seeking relationships, who could actively contribute to RSE and make independent informed decisions, or even as deserving of adult interest in their lives and cultures."*

As such, they recommended that:

*"Schools should engage pupils as partners in co-developing and evaluating RSE. Consulting students should help ensure that RSE is 'student-sensitive,' appropriate and meets the needs of young people in the context of their actual relationship and sexual cultures."*

## **Conclusion**

ICNI welcomed the action taken by the Secretary of State to embed reproductive rights and choices within the RSE curriculum. Providing this information in schools will assist in challenging the stigma that exists around sexual and reproductive health, dispel myths surrounding abortion, and equip our young people with fact-based information to enable them to make informed choices.

We note that the Department of Education are required to produce a report on the implementation of RSE by 1 September 2026. ICNI believe this should place a strong emphasis on pupils' experiences of the subject, outline the views of teachers, including their knowledge and ability to deliver the subject, and highlight evidence of best practice which is taking place to support all schools to deliver a high-quality and comprehensive RSE curriculum.

We believe that if young people know how to access sexual and reproductive health services, and have the confidence and support to do so if they choose, we will experience a changed society.

ICNI would be happy to discuss the contents of this submission further, and to give oral evidence to the Committee. To arrange please contact:

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## References

**Department of Justice (2019)** *Gillen Review Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland*. Available [here](#).

**Education and Training Inspectorate (2023)** *The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) Centres*. Available [here](#).

**Informing Choices NI (2022)** *MLA Survey into the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education in Northern Ireland*. Available [here](#).

**Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (2023)** *Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform*. Available [here](#).

**Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland (2023)** *Let us Learn: A Learning for Life and Work report*. Available [here](#).

**United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023)** *Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Committee on the Rights of the Child*. Available [here](#).