Written evidence from the Sex Education Forum

About the Sex Education Forum
Established in 1987, the Sex Education Forum is a group of partners working together to achieve quality relationships and sex education (RSE) for all children and young people. Our membership for schools and other educators serves to connect organisations and individuals with the latest practice, research and policy information. Our work on RSE is underpinned by evidence, a rights-based approach and the expressed needs of children and young people. The Sex Education Forum is hosted at National Children’s Bureau.

We are interested in the sexual health inquiry because there is well established evidence about the positive impact on sexual health when young people receive high quality relationships and sex education (RSE).

Our submission describes the opportunity and challenges of the new legislation which makes RSE compulsory in schools, and draws the Committee’s attention to new survey data which we are in the process of collecting.

About relationships and sex education (RSE)

1. The Sex Education Forum define RSE as learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, human sexuality, sex and sexual health. It should equip children and young people with the information, skills and positive values to enable them to have safe, fulfilling relationships and to take responsibility for their sexual health and wellbeing.

2. From a public health perspective evidence shows that RSE is effective in reducing likelihood of teenage pregnancy, increasing the age at which young people first have sex, increasing use of contraception and reducing age-differential between young people and sexual partners. This evidence is summarised in our briefing ‘SRE – the evidence’, complete with references (Sex Education Forum, 2015).

3. The Children and Social Work Act (2017) made Relationships Education (in primary schools) and RSE (in secondary schools) statutory in all schools in England. The expected start date for mandatory provision is September 2020. The new legislation is an opportunity to address the poor and patchy quality of RSE, as evidence in our report of young people’s experiences of RSE – see ‘Heads or Tails’ (2016), which reports that 48% of young people (from a sample of over 2000 respondents) had not learnt all that they needed to about consent.

4. Draft Government guidance on RSE, Relationships Education and Health Education (July 2018) sets out what children and young people should know by the end of primary / secondary. The section
under secondary RSE on ‘intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health’ includes a wide range of content and a helpful level of detail about sexual and reproductive health.

5. We are however concerned about the absence of sex education in the proposed statutory content for primary school and the very dilute encouragement to primary schools to provide a programme of sex education. Because primary schools can choose whether or not to provide sex education it means that some children will not learn about human lifecycles and that humans reproduce sexually. This will make it difficult to understand puberty and its place in human lifecycles and fertility. The primary content also misses the opportunity to set out with clarity that pupils should be taught correct terms for genitalia at primary school. It is important that children have a consistent set of terms to refer to the human body and this is particularly important from a safeguarding perspective – thus the recommendation from the Education Select Committee in their report ‘Life Lessons’ (House of Commons, 2015) that RSE become statutory in primary and secondary schools and that children be taught correct terms for genitalia.

6. For RSE to be taught effectively it is necessary that teachers and other staff involved in delivering the subject are competent and adequately trained. This is a factor of effective RSE that was identified by Kirby in 2007 and is reiterated in the evidence reviews carried out for the recent UNESCO International Technical Guidance on sexuality education (2018).

7. In a Sex Education Forum survey of 208 teachers of RSE in England, 7 out of 10 (68%) said they feel they need training to be able teach good quality SRE (Sex Education Forum, 2014). In a survey of over 500 educators carried out by National Education Union (2018) only (29%) of respondents reported feeling confident that their school will be ready to deliver the new RSE by September 2019. Almost 70% (68.6%) said that staff in their school have not had sufficient training to deliver PSHE or RSE at a high-quality. There is therefore a risk that without substantial investment in workforce development for RSE the delivery will not be high-quality and will fail to realise the potential contribution to young people’s sexual health and wellbeing.

8. In order to understand the areas that teachers and other educators need more support with in order to provide high quality RSE the Sex Education Forum is carrying out a new survey (closing date 31st October 2018). The survey can be found here: https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/SEFteachersurvey2018 - we intend to submit additional written evidence once this data is available.

9. Given the apparent gap in training and educator competence the Sex Education Forum believe it is essential that the Government design and implement a national training strategy to support high quality statutory RSE. This needs to consider both initial teacher training and the needs of teachers in school now. This would comply with the advice of UNESCO recommendation 6 in their recently updated International Technical Guidance on sexuality education (2018) to: “Provide educators with sensitization, values clarification, quality pre- and on-the-job training and continuous professional development opportunities” (p95-96).
10. Only 3% of teachers teaching RSE said that initial teacher training had prepared them adequately to teach the subject (Sex Education Forum, 2008). 90% of teachers of RSE consulted by the Sex Education Forum (2014) think teachers should have the option to train as specialists in PSHE Education at initial teacher training. The Government are yet to announce any plans or investment to support training in RSE. Until this situation changes it is likely that the new legislation making RSE statutory in schools will fall short of its potential contribution to children and young people’s health and wellbeing.

References

House of Commons (2015) Life Lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools – Education Select Committee


Sex Education Forum (2008) Forum briefing: Teacher’s survey on sex and relationships education, NCB.


