

RSE Consultation Interim Analysis

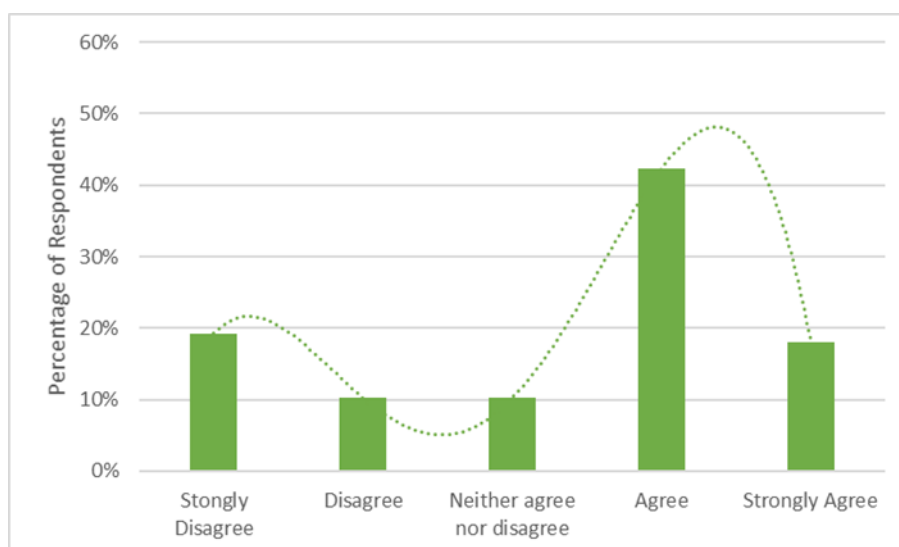
This paper provides a summary of the key themes that were raised across responses to the RSE consultation with regards to the guidance itself. The analysis aims to stimulate discussion and ideas on how the guidance could be strengthened.

Overarching Themes

Across responses from teachers, practitioners or senior leaders, both in online submissions and focus groups, there was broad support for the general orientation of the RSE curriculum. This included the importance placed within the guidance on the rights of the child, and the whole school approach it espouses. There was also general agreement towards a key rationale underscoring the reforms, namely the importance of updating and refreshing teaching and learning around sex and relationships. This was in recognition of the importance of supporting children and young people to confidently and safely navigate contemporary social life.

Clarity of Guidance

There was also broad recognition that the guidance was clear and valuable in helping teachers and schools understand and act on the new RSE curriculum. Those responding as practitioners and senior leaders within online responses, for example, tended to agree that the guidance was clear:



Some respondents offered comments on where they found the guidance useful. This included the breakdowns of teaching focus at different stages of development, which teachers and senior leaders found useful in visualising the curriculum, at least at a high level. Many also thought that the tone, language and length of the guidance was accessible. As one respondent explained:

The guidance offers relevant information to practitioners in the following ways:

- *Clear principles are established*
- *Links to the 'what matters statements'*
- *Advises on developing learning in RSE across the curriculum*
- *Provides 3 strands which give relevant contexts for learning*
- *Clear table of content for each strand, organised in developmental stages.*

Mainstream Teacher

Segmenting Audiences

Within focus groups, there were apparent differences in how guidance is used by different members of the school community. Senior leaders, for example, often stated that they use guidance for planning purposes, and to ensure that they are in compliance with the school's statutory duties. On the whole, senior leaders felt the guidance was clear and valuable in this regard.

Teachers and practitioners tended to approach guidance with a more practical orientation. For many, RSE in particular and curriculum guidance in general is used as a means of establishing what and how to teach in class. Two distinct viewpoints towards the RSE guidance emerged amongst teachers and practitioners, especially within focus groups:

- Some were excited by the opportunity to engage more meaningfully in curriculum design around RSE and appreciated the flexibility that the guidance afforded. From this perspective, the guidance presented a balanced and accessible account of the scope and general orientation of RSE. From these perspectives, the guidance clearly set out what was required, and was valuable to their work.
- Many others felt that greater detail, especially around the substantive content of teaching and learning, would be valuable in helping them to implement the new curriculum. Some offering these perspectives were looking to the guidance to provide more explicit syllabi to support teaching and learning. Suggestions included greater links to resources and guidance that could help them make the connections between high-level statements as expressed within the focus of teaching, and what teaching and learning looks like in the classroom. Other respondents felt that this detail would support practitioners that are perhaps not as confident as others around the topics covered, and the conversations they may generate in the classroom.

This presents two considerations in refining the guidance, including the precise audiences that the guidance is aimed at, and the levels of detail that can be realistically achieved, especially around the content of provision.

Reflection: If a key objective of curriculum reform is supporting behaviour change, namely improving what and how content is taught in schools, then senior leaders are perhaps a key audience for this guidance. They are likely to have a key role in interpreting, implementing and supporting the roll out of RSE within their school or setting. In terms of this audience, the guidance is largely effective in communicating the statutory obligations surrounding RSE, and in supporting schools in planning and engaging with the new curriculum.

Depth within the Guidance

In terms of the significance of the issue of depth of information in refining the guidance, it may also be valuable to consider the guidance as an important part of a broader process. This includes greater engagement with the new curriculum generally and RSE in particular, in which teachers and schools will familiarise themselves with the principles and working practices informing the approach. This may improve clarity of understanding and confidence surrounding subsidiarity derived through greater engagement and ownership over curriculum design. The guidance will also sit alongside broader conversations, training and advice that will support teachers to enact the RSE curriculum. The Welsh Government, for example, have made £100k available for the development of a suite of teaching, learning and professional learning resources, as well as best practice case studies. From this perspective, the guidance represents an important element within a broader suite of resources and support that will be made available to teachers and schools. From this perspective, it may be valuable to consider this balance when expanding the extent and nature of further detail when revising the guidance.

Age Appropriateness

Another key area raised by respondents included greater detail around what constitutes age-appropriate provision. In more open conversations and in online responses, some practitioners felt that the breakdowns of teaching focus provided across the guidance were valuable. Some felt, however, that it was difficult to distinguish between appropriate provision within the age ranges highlighted in the guidance. From these perspectives, for example, what constitutes age-appropriate provision for 12 year olds would be considerably different to 16 year olds. As one teacher expressed:

I feel that the content of RSE needs to be made more explicit and structured as currently it seems there are no guidelines as to what is appropriate content according to age and understanding. Also there needs to be explicit clarification of what should be taught and when. How will the content be adjusted according to the readiness of pupils? Not all pupils in one class would be receptive to the same learning.

Mainstream Teacher

Underscoring this theme there was a concern for getting it right, especially in clearly and confidently communicating with learners around certain topics, especially on gender, identity and sexuality. Both explicitly and implicitly, there was apparent risk-aversion and a degree of anxiety amongst some practitioners and senior leaders. From these perspectives, clearer links and more detailed breakdowns between the high-level statements and the nature of age-appropriate provision would be beneficial. It was felt that this could provide a clearer indication of the line between appropriate and inappropriate.

Greater detail around the precise parameters of age-appropriate provision was also felt to be beneficial in communicating with parents and carers, and the broader community. This includes in raising awareness and building confidence amongst some parents. More broadly, some of the opposition from parents and carers to the overall approach to RSE may be rooted in the principle of subsidiarity, in which the pivot away from prescription opens spaces for misunderstandings and misinformation about the substantive rationale and content of RSE. In focus groups, parents wished to see more explicit examples of what the curriculum looked like in practice, including the activities, topics and conversations that were taking place.

As an example of what schools are encountering, one specific area where it was felt greater detail would be beneficial related to what RSE looks like for younger learners. This included more explicit reference to the focus on exploring friendship, as some schools were having to address misinformation and anxiety from parents. There were examples of schools responding to concerns from parents that younger children would be exposed to very specific and inappropriate content.

Other Observations and Suggestions

Respondents also offered other suggestions on how the guidance could be strengthened. These included:

- The importance of fleshing out the general rationale behind the RSE curriculum. This was felt to be important in helping practitioners and schools articulate the vision underscoring RSE, including to parents. From some perspectives, this could highlight the importance and focus of RSE in supporting learner well-being, which was the root of some concerns from parents. This could also include greater emphasis on rights and equality to ensure that it is at the heart of a school's approach.
- It was also felt that greater detail around safeguarding would be valuable. This would provide reassurance to schools, including in helping those less familiar with the safeguarding considerations surrounding discussions on topics relating to RSE.

- Some respondents felt guidance on engaging parents and carers may be beneficial, including in building confidence, consensus, and in addressing any concerns. Some felt that parental engagement was central to RSE, including in recognising them as primary educators of children and in providing consistent and effective advice and support to learners. From these perspectives, respondents wished to see more explicit reference to parents within the guidance, including in how they could be engaged around RSE.
- Similarly, some respondents also highlighted the importance of engaging governors in building confidence and consensus surrounding RSE. Several respondents felt more explicit reference could be given to governors, including in adding them to the audience list (P. 6 of the guidance) and including guidance on working with them throughout the curriculum development process.
- Expressing the sentiment of removing bias from teaching and learning without using the term 'indoctrination' (P. 8 of the guidance). Whilst agreeing with the general sentiment of the guidance, this was felt by some as confrontational and serving to propagate and sustain unhelpful narratives that single out certain schools unfairly, particularly those with a religious character. One respondent suggested using the term 'objective' as a more neutral expression of the sentiment.
- There was also feedback on some of the terms and ideas used within the guidance, including gender and sexuality. It was felt by some that greater precision and detail around these terms would be beneficial in understanding and enacting the new curriculum.

General Conclusions

Overall, the guidance is largely considered clear and effective. Whilst the majority of suggestions relating to strengthening the guidance are relatively minor, the most substantive question relates to the balance between breadth and depth. As it stands, a significant proportion of teachers responding to the consultation feel that greater depth could be beneficial. This feedback itself needs to be balanced with broader considerations, including how the guidance may fit with broader support offered to schools, and the importance of avoiding too much prescription.