

Department for Education Consultation: Changes to the teaching of Sex & Relationship Education and PSHE

Written evidence submitted by the Northumbria PCC

This submission is made by the Northumbria PCC, Vera Baird QC, after having consulted with local service providers and service users. The contributions made, both individually and collectively, were extremely valuable and are used throughout this written submission.

Please Note: The answers provided in each section have been limited by but kept within the 250 word restriction imposed by the DfE.

Consultation Part I: Relationships and Sex Education

1. Thinking about relationships education in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices.

The three most important subject areas are:

- **Core pro-social values** – There are a number of key concepts such as love, respect and kindness that need to be addressed as well as self-awareness, empathy and consideration for others
- **Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships** – Children need to understand what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like from a very early age. As one of our service providers argued:

‘Young children have told us that school was one of the safest places for them and that often in their households, due to the abuse, even the non-perpetrating parent rarely communicated with them about such issues’

These lessons should cover relationships with family and friends as well as intimate relationships and address questions relating to personal boundaries and consent. As one service provider argued:

‘The issue of consent should be introduced at this age - i.e. hugging, touching or kissing - letting children know that they do not have to do anything which makes them and others feel uncomfortable’.

- **Personal Safety: Taking Care Of Ourselves & Others** – Children at this age need education to recognise, understand and respond to threats to their safety, particularly on-line and also off-line. As one service provider argued:

‘...more and more children have smart-phones, tablets/iPad's etc., and unlimited access to the internet which makes it extremely difficult for parents/carers/teachers to monitor what children are viewing and who they are interacting with’

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2. Thinking about relationships and sex education in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices.

The three most important subject areas are:

- **Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships** – As a society we have to confront the reality that there will be potential perpetrators of domestic abuse, as well as victims, in every classroom. As such, all young people need to be educated on the nature of healthy and unhealthy relationships and they all need time to discuss what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Such discussions will need to address coercive and controlling behaviours and how these can be exercised by older males that may not identify/be identifiable as intimate partners as well as by people of their own age. Lesson content will also need to be inclusive of different sexualities and explicitly address issues relating to race and faith. Failing to address these issues, or leaving lesson content/delivery solely to local discretion, is not acceptable. As one local service provider put it, there will always be disagreements: *‘between communities around these issues and how they should be taught or not taught... [which, if they are not addressed] can potentially leave children at risk of future if not imminent harm’*
- **Other forms of Gender-Based Violence & Abuse** – There are issues of gender-based violence that can affect young people and which also need to be addressed. These issues included pornography, sexual harassment, sexting, sexualised cyber-bullying and sexual exploitation as well as issues such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage.
- **Reproductive Rights** - Reproduction, reproductive rights, body autonomy, self-care, and protection from Sexually Transmitted Diseases are also key issues that young people need support to understand and address

In all these areas, there is a need to ensure that teaching staff are aware of local services and avenues to support. For example, one local service provider made a strong argument for *‘a focus on Children’s/Human rights in relation to these areas of learning; mainly because this avoids the acculturation of issues that should be kept within the realms of rights and safeguarding rather than subjective opinion or potential manipulation by perpetrators’*

3. We are particularly interested in understanding stakeholder views on Relationships Education and RSE which are specific to the digital context. Are there important aspects of ensuring safe online relationships that would not otherwise be covered in wider Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education, or as part of the computing curriculum?

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One group of young women aged 13-19 who contributed to this consultation had learned nothing in school about on-line relationships and the dangers they were facing. Talking about their experiences, they were very clear on what they needed: practical advice (e.g. how to control privacy and location settings online), background information (e.g. on the laws relating to on-line relationships) and immediate, technical help (e.g. when a picture was shared inappropriately). Such insight may not be the norm. Research by the former PCC for Northampton, for example, has shown that many young people believe that they don't need any on-line safety advice suggesting that awareness is low and the task of raising and addressing these issues significant.

In an age characterised by inter-generational gaps in computer literacy, however, the need for advice, education and support extends beyond children and young people to their parents/guardians. As noted earlier, children may have a range of devices that can give them almost unlimited access to the internet; access which many parents will struggle to monitor and control. And, as another of our service providers noted, this may be particularly true for parents living in marginalised communities or for whom English is a second or third language.

Piecemeal offerings of advice and guidance are unlikely to be enough, however, and need to be replaced with a whole school approach, built on a strong, focussed curriculum, which enables all school staff (teaching and non-teaching), parents and guardians to engage with the task of keeping children and young people safe on-line. As one local service provider argued:

'this isn't just about a set of 'rules' it's also about informing parents and teachers and supporting them to have ongoing discussions with children and young people so that it becomes a dialogue that shifts and progresses in line with technological shifts and progressions'.

4. We are also interested in understanding more about how schools communicate with parents on Relationships Education and RSE and are able to make informed decisions that best meet the needs of their children. This includes a right to withdraw their child from sex education within the RSE subject but not from sex education in the national curriculum for science. How should schools effectively consult parents so they can make informed decisions that meet the needs of their child, including on the right to withdraw? For example, how often, on what issues and by what means

Schools need to consult with parents and guardians in a variety of ways including letters, face-to-face meetings and parents' fora. Training for parents will also be important to enable them to read and understand the relevant research and data and to place meaningful controls on the PC's and other devices that children use to go on-line. Placing course content on-line may also be a way of enabling parents to feel better informed and to better frame the questions they still want to ask.

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Helping parents to understand what is being taught is an important goal. It is also an important way of challenging the many cultural myths that surround the content and impact of PSHE education, myths that may affect teachers and parents as much as or more than young people themselves. As one service provider argued, based on their experience of delivering FGM work in schools:

'...the barriers to delivering the awareness training and the support for young people have never been the young people themselves - who have shown maturity and engaged really well in sessions - the barriers have been teachers who have felt the subject matter is 'horrific' and therefore dangerous... [and] a deep rooted misbelief that 'knowledge' about sexual relationships and our bodies can be dangerous'

In this context, it is interesting to note that the group of young women who contributed to this consultation, though not necessarily representative of local young people, were nonetheless very clear about the limits to should be placed on parental influence:

'...parents should be made aware that there will be discussions around sex education and relationships to prepare them for conversations that might be brought up at home, [but]... should not be able to stop children attending'.

Consultation Part II: Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE)

5. Thinking about PSHE in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please include your reasons for choosing each subject area or evidence to support your suggestions.

In addition to the areas of instruction identified in earlier sections, children in primary schools also need to understand:

- Health and wellbeing – This should include the basics of healthy eating and personal hygiene as well as developing individual self-esteem and a healthy body image
- Safety in school – This should include how to recognise bullying behaviour and how to respond to it
- Money and money management – This should include the concept of money, simple budgeting and the importance of saving money etc.

6. Thinking about PSHE in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please also include your reasons for choosing each subject area or evidence to support your suggestions.

In addition to the areas of instruction identified for this age group in earlier sections secondary schools pupils also need age-appropriate instruction in:

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- Health and wellbeing – This should include the basics of healthy eating and self-care as well as issues relating to self-esteem, body image and eating disorders. It should also include how to deal with peer pressure, how to manage the demand for constant social networking, how to cope with exam pressures and how to manage difficult emotions such as anxiety and depression.
- Safety– this should include the issue of bullying in/around school and the wider social issues that impact on personal safety such as substance use and misuse, crime and gang culture, pornography, racism, sexism and extremism.
- Money and money management – this should include money management and budgeting issues, home management, housing and employment issues

7. How much flexibility do you think schools should have to meet the needs of individual pupils and to reflect the diversity of local communities and wider society in the content of PSHE lessons in schools?

The favoured approach should combine local flexibility (in terms of meeting the particular needs of children, young people and local communities) with a degree of national prescription (in terms of ensuring that those parts of the curriculum considered to be core could not simply be dropped in the face of local opposition). For example, whilst one local specialist service argued that:

‘All of the information which is taught as part of PSHE should be fully inclusive at all times - however, flexibility is key if teachers are to reach individuals and marginalised groups’

Another also noted that:

‘Being able to use relevant material to teach with and being sensitive to a community bias are crucial but this should not interfere with what needs to be taught as part of the curriculum. As long as the curriculum is not diluted but is in fact focused on needs and presenting issues’.

In this context then, there is a need to balance the beliefs, wishes and (sometimes) demands of individual parents against the needs of and risks to children and young people, both individually and collectively.