

# Ensuring access to the full curriculum

## Consultation response form

Your name: Professor Simon Murphy

**Organisation (if applicable):** DECIPHer: Centre for the Development and Evaluation of Complex Interventions for Public Health Improvement

DECIPHer brings together leading experts from a range of disciplines to tackle a range of public health issues, with a particular focus on developing and evaluating multi-level interventions that will have an impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

The School Health Research Network This is led from DECIPHer and is a policy-practice-research partnership between Cardiff University, Welsh Government (both health and education), Public Health Wales and Cancer Research UK. Over a 6-year period SHRN has recruited all maintained secondary schools in Wales and established a data collection and reporting infrastructure that meets health and wellbeing data needs at local, regional and national levels.

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Responses should be returned by **28 November 2019** to:

Health and Well-being AoLE Team  
Arts, Humanities and Well-being Branch  
The Education Directorate  
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or completed electronically and sent to

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Please indicate which of the following stakeholder groups you are responding as:

Child or young person	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent/carer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other family member	<input type="checkbox"/>
School, teacher, governor	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other education practitioner	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisation or representative body	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Individual	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 1** – What implications would there be for learners, parents/carers and schools if all learners were required to receive RE and/or RSE lessons in the new curriculum?

Please use the space below for your comments:

As a research centre, our area of expertise relates to RSE, and so throughout this response, we will only comment in relation to ensuring full access to RSE under the new curriculum and not RE.

We welcome the proposal of embedding RSE in a whole school approach. This is one of the most important elements of effective RSE: the inclusion of this approach within the new curriculum for Wales is in line with best practice. Whole-school approaches, that promote coherence between school policy and practice, facilitates improved learning outcomes, increases pupil emotional well-being, and reduces health-risk behaviours (IUHPE, 2008). The principles of this approach necessitate that *all* children and young people have access to high quality RSE, the messages of which are embedded across the curriculum and reinforced by school culture and community practices, including parents. Making RSE in the new curriculum compulsory for all learners is essential for ensuring that all children and young people in Wales have access to high quality RSE. Without this legislative change and the full implementation of it, RSE will remain a low priority for schools (e.g. Estyn, 2017), be narrowly conceived, will neglect the needs of all children and young people, and will continue to create and perpetuate gender and sexual health inequalities (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill and Livingstone 2013; Albury and Byron 2015; Hope 2015; STIR 2016; McGeeney and Hanson 2017).

All children and young people have the right to high quality, holistic and inclusive education about sexuality and relationships (European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), 2017). The UK Government (including Wales) is a signatory to the 1989 United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and has agreed to uphold the rights of children and young people as outlined in the Convention. In its recent report to the UK government (UNCRC 2016), the UNCRC noted that 'Relationships and Sexuality Education is not mandatory in all schools, its contents and quality varies depending on the school, and LGBT children do not have access to accurate information on their sexuality' (UNCRC 2016; 63(b) p.16) (see also the recent ENOC 2017 statements). The UNCRC recommends that the state ensure that meaningful RSE is part of the mandatory school curriculum in all schools (64(b)). In addition, the proposal of mandatory RSE for *all* pupils is also consistent with Objective 2 of the Welsh Government's National Strategy on Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (2016-2021) which states that the new curriculum must include the importance of safe, equal and healthy relationships in order to raise awareness among *all* children and young people.

Therefore, the implications for learners of the proposed change would be that each child or young person would have access to high quality, inclusive and holistic RSE, regardless of

their parent's wishes, in line with the policy objectives outlined above. This is consistent with the whole school approach outlined by the new curriculum guidance for RSE: if parents were able to opt their child out of RSE, Wales would not truly be implementing a whole school approach as parents play a vital role in this. Research looking at parental engagement in RSE has shown that this is a difficult task (Wooden and Anderson, 2012); indeed, media coverage of recent protests by parents at a school in Birmingham highlight the resistance *some* parents have to their child receiving RSE. However, the implications of not requiring *all* learners to receive RSE in the new curriculum would not truly reflect the underlying principles of the whole school approach, and also does not uphold the UNCRC convention and denies children and young people their right to receive accurate information related to their sexuality.

There is a common misperception that if RSE lessons, particularly those that cover sexuality education, are introduced to children and young people at too young an age (or even at all), that it encourages engagement in sexual relations. However, research has repeatedly found the opposite to be true as countries with the lowest teenage birth rates and the lowest proportion of sexually active young people under the age of 15 are those with established comprehensive sexuality education programmes (Ketting and Ivanova 2018). At its core, the aim of RSE lessons are to teach children and young people how to develop healthier social and emotional relationships by empowering them with the information, skills and positive values to be able to do so (Ketting and Ivanova 2018). As such, in line with our position that parents/carers should not be able to withdraw their child from RSE lessons, so should faith-based schools not be permitted to omit or distort topics from the RSE curriculum that may be regarded as controversial, such as LGBT relationships. To prevent this, the new RSE guidance for schools should clearly emphasise that all schools, faith-based or otherwise, are required to cover *all* aspects of RSE, including those that may be perceived as 'contentious'. However, it is important to acknowledge that although media coverage may suggest that faith-based schools and religious parents *in general* are opposed to any kind of RSE, research findings (e.g. Aventin *et al.*, 2015; Ritchwood *et al.*, 2017), suggest that many are open to school-based RSE.

We do note, however, that there may be occasional circumstances where it is appropriate for the child *themselves* to temporarily withdraw from RSE lessons (for example, if there is a particular safeguarding issue, or if they are experiencing some personal trauma where participating in RSE would be too distressing for them at that moment in time). We would recommend that schools should be given some flexibility in order to demonstrate sensitivity in this regard, but that this should be a joint decision made in partnership between the child or young person and the school, and that the child or young person's wishes should be prioritised.

If parents were unable to 'opt out' their child from RSE, this may mean that some parents feel angry, isolated and resentful. The guidance in Wales on RSE in the new curriculum is currently vague, and therefore it would be necessary for the Welsh Government to provide more information on how to co-produce the curriculum with not only children and young people, but also parents, teachers and the wider community, in line with the whole school approach. This would not only build the cross-curriculum content to ensure it is needs-led and experience-near for learners, but also involve parents in the development of the curriculum and how it is delivered. This is likely to cause disruptions for schools at first, as research shows engaging parents in general is something schools find difficult (Avvisati *et al.*, 2013; Axford *et al.*, 2019): for example, data collected via the School Environment Questionnaire as part of the School Health Research Network (2019) shows that over 85% of schools attempted to involve some parents in decisions regarding health and wellbeing improvement and 40% attempted to involve most or all parents. Only 17% of schools, however, felt they actually involved at least half of parents (Report on the 2017/18 School Environment Questionnaire for the Welsh Network of Healthy School Schemes). Therefore, the introduction of mandatory RSE should be seen as a timely opportunity for schools to involve parents, particularly those parents who may be resistant to the change and/or have never engaged with the school before. This may be particularly pertinent for parents in faith-based schools who may be resistant to the change, and involving them in the co-production of the curriculum may be an important first step to support schools to engage parents more

easily. It is therefore vital that the Government supports schools to engage parents, given the evidence that shows the difficulties that they currently face in doing so, and the greater challenges they may face as a consequence of the proposed change.

Many parents who are resistant to schools delivering RSE object on the basis that it is their fundamental right to teach their child RSE topics or to at least decide who teaches them and when and how they are taught. Indeed, several petitions were made to the English Government in response to their proposal to remove the parental right to withdraw from RSE on this basis, such as the ParentPower petition ([parentpower.family/rse-parental-rights-petition/](http://parentpower.family/rse-parental-rights-petition/)). This states that the undersigned had 'grave concerns about the physical, psychological and spiritual implications of teaching children about certain sexual and relational concepts proposed in RSE and believe that they have no place within a mandatory school curriculum'. Indeed, parents are often indicated as adolescents' primary source of information about sex (Commendador, 2010) and can play an important role in supervising adolescent activity, conveying appropriate sexual health information to their children, modelling open and respectful communication about sex, and can exert a substantial influence on adolescents' attitudes, values and beliefs in relation to sexual and reproductive health (Akers, Holland and Bost, 2011; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2003; Meschke, Bartholomae and Zentall, 2002; Wideman *et al.*, 2016). Whilst one point made by Parent Power that children within any class will have varying levels of maturity in relation to sexual issues is valid, the importance of peer behaviour as a means of education and influence on sexual behaviour should not be underestimated (Potard, Courtois and Rusch, 2008; Van de Bongardt *et al.*, 2014; Warner, 2018). Indeed, research has often shown that parents underestimate the sexual experiences of their children: parents often fail to have timely discussions, with as many as 40% of adolescents engaging in sexual behaviour before parents discuss sex with them (Beckett *et al.*, 2010). It is also important to consider the possibility that on *some* issues that parents may not have the experience and knowledge of the issues faced by young people today. For example, many of these issues are directly related to the rapid rise of technological developments in recent years, such as sexting, cyberbullying and online pornography. Thus, it is likely that parents were not exposed to these issues when growing up and can potentially feel ill-prepared to counsel their children on these topics. Indeed, teachers themselves may similarly feel unequipped to deliver sessions on some of these topics, hence a need to provide comprehensive training and Continued Professional Development to teachers. However, by engaging with parents/carers throughout the development of the curriculum it not just builds their own knowledge and competence on these subjects, but will also hopefully encourage more open and timely discussions. Meta-analyses have demonstrated that programmes involving parents improve communication about sexual health between parents and adolescents (Santa Maria, 2015) and increase safer sex behaviours (Wideman *et al.*, 2019; Wideman *et al.*, 2016).

As the new curriculum for Wales is also cross-curricular, it is envisaged that RSE will be delivered not as a separate topic, but will be embedded in a more holistic, cross-curricular way. If some learners have been opted out of RSE by their parents, this would be difficult for the school to implement if RSE-related 'topics' are delivered not only across Health and Wellbeing but also other Areas of Learning and Experience. To allow them to opt their child out of RSE would continue to place low value on the subject and privilege other subjects over it. A decision to allow parental opt out would be one which actively acknowledges the status of RSE as low, and would allow for continued inequality of delivery across Wales, with only schools whose SLT are committed to the health and wellbeing of pupils choosing to deliver and prioritise high quality RSE for their pupils. Without ensuring full access and therefore increasing the status of RSE, some schools will choose to continue to prioritise the delivery of other subjects and quality of the delivery of the RSE curriculum would be compromised and inconsistent.

Further implications for schools and other educational institutions to consider is that all young people should have access to high quality RSE, including learners aged 16-18. There is evidence that shows much dating and relationship violence among young people goes unchallenged in educational institutions, including Further Education (Young *et al.*, 2017; Jamal *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, more attention could also be paid to embedding RSE via a whole school approach in sixth forms and in post 16 settings.

If the parental right to withdraw their child from RSE is maintained under the new curriculum, it is relevant to note that the FGM guidelines for health workers and schools already include withdrawal from sex education as an indicator of risk (EVAW, 2019). The same thinking should be applied to other forms of violence against women and girls, such as child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation, rape, sexual assault, domestic violence and abuse online, and schools should be encouraged to note any parental request to withdraw their child from RSE as very significant and to consider it alongside any other matter of concern about any child. This should then be included as sound observation and practice in school safeguarding policies. If the withdrawal of children from RSE by their parents is considered a sign of potential safeguarding issues, then the education system has the responsibility to ensure that all children have the right to be protected. If *all* pupils are required to receive RSE, the implications for learners are that they will be safeguarded more effectively through having full access to holistic and rights-based RSE. One of the roles of our education system is to protect the most vulnerable learners, and removing the parental right to withdraw their children from RSE is one way we can ensure these learners are more effectively safeguarded, by educating them about healthy relationships. Allowing some learners to be excluded from RSE jeopardises their emotional, sexual and physical health.

Compulsory RSE is, however, just a starting point, and the process to ensure every child in Wales receives high quality, rights and equity based, inclusive, holistic RSE should follow with the development of comprehensive statutory guidance setting out a detailed core curriculum. It is this core curriculum that *all* children and young people are entitled to receive, and therefore should be delivered in *all* schools (faith-based, ALN schools/units etc.). Indeed, the core curriculum should take the form of the 'whole school approach' model, as well as the development and delivery of professional training to ensure schools are equipped to deliver high quality RSE (see below).

**Question 2** – What support, information and guidance would be needed if this approach was adopted?

Please use the space below for your comments:

As highlighted above, there is much work needed to overcome the apprehension *some* parents/carers may feel about their child receiving RSE in schools. In order to implement a whole school approach to RSE, it is important parents/carers are engaged as a key part of the wider community that should reinforce a consistent positive ethos and messages around inclusive relationships, or encourage learners to seek help and support. A significant amount of public engagement work may need to be done in this area in order to create the infrastructure to begin to implement this vision. Schools would need more support and resources to engage parents in this process, and would benefit from a wider awareness raising campaign that would seek to inform parents about the curriculum content, along with some public engagement events that parents can attend to find out more information. Also, enabling the content of the RSE curriculum to be co-produced with parents/carers as well as children and young people (see below), could help support the engagement of parents/carers and the implementation of the whole-school approach model. Under this model, parents also have a responsibility to reinforce the positive messages delivered within the RSE curriculum, and parents need to be engaged in order to understand this. However, it is important to manage the expectations of parents, and schools should be given some support and coordinated guidance from Welsh Government (through a wider comprehensive campaign strategy) on how to appropriately involve and engage parents/carers.

As highlighted by our response to the consultation regarding the RSE guidance, there were significant limitations highlighted, including the need for more specific infrastructure and fleshing out of the details of the content of what will actually be delivered. However, this must be a process that is carried out in collaboration with schools, parents/carers and children and young people themselves. It is important to know what needs to be taught to young people, and when, and this needs to be led by children and young people's experiences. More public

engagement work with children and young people is required specifically about the content of the curriculum in order to develop a more detailed curriculum. Research has highlighted that much RSE provision is out of touch with children and young people's lived realities and the wider learning. Indeed the 'age appropriateness' of content is often drawn upon by practitioners as reasons to avoid RSE topics, thus failing to address or silencing children and young people's questions and curiosities on RSE topics that may actually relate to their everyday experiences. The need to develop an 'experience-near' curriculum is why research into what children and young people themselves want/need to be taught is so important, especially when attempting to produce an inclusive RSE curriculum suitable for the needs of *all* learners. It is worth investing in this work and research to engage children and young people to ensure the content is relevant to them. Regard should be given to supporting the development of a children and young people's RSE implementation group, made up of representatives of schools in the Local Authority, which could ensure that pupil voice is heard at a Local Authority level as well as a school level. As curriculum content and whole school approaches are implemented and delivered this would ensure they are experience-near. Schools could also benefit from using available data, such as the SHRN data and research briefings/papers, in order to understand the needs of their particular learners: for example, some of the RSE-related data in SHRN reports and briefing papers available (see [shrn.org.uk](http://shrn.org.uk)) available to schools includes prevalence rates for unprotected sex, dating violence, sexual harassment in school, and sexting. While a fleshed-out core curriculum is necessary, schools should also be given the flexibility and support to understand this data and how this can be used to develop a curriculum relevant to their own learners' needs as a form of evidence-based best practice. In addition, the guidance needs to specifically address how teachers can deliver content for ALN learners.

All of the above highlights why professional training and development for teachers so important. At present, the guidance does not provide a clear picture of what is required of teachers and schools. The guidance offers a clear and comprehensive guidance on the under-pinning principles of high quality RSE, but only lists the 8 areas to guide teachers on content. As previously discussed, the issues facing young people today are to some extent 'new' issues (e.g. sexting, pornography etc.) and teachers need expert support to create content to support student learning in these areas. The lack of curriculum content, together with the limited description and application of the whole school approach, poses practical problems for schools required to implement the guidance. As highlighted above, guidance would also have to be given to schools to address the issue of resistance to delivery of the curriculum and how to be sensitive to the beliefs and circumstances of individual learners if parental right to withdraw from RSE was removed.

Given these issues, we suggest that significant improvements need to be made to Initial Teacher Training and continued professional development of teachers. In order to support this, we recommend implementing a RSE professional development pathway (differing on the stage of education) which will be required to be incorporated into Initial Teacher Education and professional learning courses. This would allow an opportunity for teachers to further their professional development, specialising in RSE, with the potential for a Masters level RSE qualification. This would ensure consistent, high quality delivery for all learners in schools across Wales. Where teachers have undertaken their ITE in other UK countries, a 'catch-up course' would be required in order to teach in Wales which would help teachers understand how RSE should be delivered under the new curriculum.

To support a cohort of teachers trained in delivering high quality RSE within the new curriculum structure, we would suggest that schools should have a specialist, trained RSE lead with access to bilingual resources and guidance to support the curriculum using a whole school approach. Beyond this, each Local Authority should have a dedicated RSE lead who works with the Consortia to provide external support, coordinate CPD and ensure consistency and quality of external organisations/providers when implementing a whole school approach.

As well as improving the delivery of ITE and CPD to support the implementation of mandatory RSE for all learners, schools and teachers would require bi-lingual resources and comprehensive guidance (e.g. a textbook). Without these, teachers may continue to lack

confidence in the delivery of RSE and it is possible that RSE delivery in Wales will continue to vary in both quantity and quality and fail to address the needs of *all* children and young people. We would recommend working closely with experts to develop a pool of appropriate resources: the Welsh Government should establish and maintain an RSE Hwb to host high quality RSE resources and materials, as well as an RSE research, practice and training network to support the provision of up to date research, training and practice.

Finally, the Welsh Government should consider supporting mechanisms through which the implementation of the RSE curriculum within the HWB AoLE is monitored. For example, Estyn could consider the inspection of RSE as part of their new inspection framework, and more importantly, the Welsh Government should consider a clear evaluation strategy of the new curriculum and to establish an RSE excellence mark to highlight exemplary whole school approaches to RSE delivery. This would ensure that RSE lessons under the new curriculum are suitable and appropriate for all learners' needs, and review the extent to which the curriculum is supporting *all* children and young people's right to accurate and factual information about their sexuality, in line with the recommendations from the UNCRC.

**Question 3** – Our proposal is that parents/carers should not be able to prevent their child from having RE or RSE lessons. This will be rolled out from September 2022, for all primary age learners and learners in Year 7 in secondary school (with additional year groups being added each year).

Should the ability of parents/carers to prevent their child from receiving RE and RSE lessons also be stopped under the old curriculum from September 2022? (This would only have implications for learners in Years 8–11 in 2022, Years 9–11 in 2023, and so on.)

<b>Yes</b>	✓	<b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Not sure</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Why do you think that?

As outlined above, our position is that *all* children and young people are entitled to receive high quality, inclusive and holistic education about relationships and sexuality. Our position is based on the fact that, as stated above, UK Government (including Wales) is a signatory to the 1989 United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and has agreed to uphold the rights of children and young people as outlined in the Convention. The UNCRC recommends that the state ensure that meaningful RSE is part of the mandatory school curriculum in all schools (64(b)). Furthermore, objective 2 of the Welsh Government's National Strategy on Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (2016-2021) relates to 'increased awareness in children and young people of the importance of safe, equal and healthy relationships and that abusive behaviour is always wrong'. The strategy itself highlights the importance of the implementation of relationship and sexuality education contributes to achieving this objective: 'we want to ensure all children and young people have access to developmentally appropriate, high quality learning that responds to their needs and experiences' (Welsh Government, 2019). We justify our position that the ability of parents/carers to stop their child from receiving RSE should be stopped under the old curriculum from September 2022 on the grounds that to not do this would mean a generation of children denied their right to this education, as well as not being included as part of the response to VAWDASV being implemented in Wales. Research has shown that dating and relationship violence among 11-16-year olds in Wales has become highly normalised, with significant proportions of both boys and girls reporting victimisation and perpetration of emotionally and physically abusive behaviours (Young *et al.*, 2019). This research also demonstrated that prevalence of such behaviours escalates with increasing age. There is an opportunity to disrupt this trajectory by intervening as soon as possible by preventing parents from withdrawing their child from RSE for *all* children across all age groups.

As stated above, we also would urge the Welsh Government to consider making RSE for all post-16 learners compulsory: evidence demonstrates that of a large sample of 16-19-year-old Further Education students in England and Wales, 55.1% of males and 53.5% of females reported experiencing some form of dating and relationship violence (Young *et al.*, 2017). This research found little or no patterning by gender and other social differences, which suggests that dating and relationship violence is becoming normalised for 16-19-year olds. It is important, therefore, to ensure that from the moment the new curriculum is implemented *all* children and young people up to the age of 19 in education are entitled to inclusive, high, quality and experience-near RSE in order to attempt to overcome the abusive behaviours young people demonstrate and experience that we can see from research evidence.

**Question 4** – What is an appropriate name for ‘religious education’, to accurately reflect the broader scope proposed in the new curriculum?

<b>No change</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Religion, values and ethics</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Religions and worldviews</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Reasons for your choice:

Our area of expertise relates to Health and Wellbeing and therefore we do not have a position on this question.

**Question 5** – We would like to know your views on the effects that not including a right to withdraw in the new curriculum would have on the Welsh language, specifically on:

- i) opportunities for people to use Welsh
- ii) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

What effects do you think there would be? How could positive effects be increased, or negative effects be mitigated?

**Supporting comments**

To ensure that the provision of RSE extends equal opportunities for people to use Welsh, the translation of all key materials is essential. Those providing resources should be supported in this translation process so as not to exclude key, high quality providers because they do not offer services or materials in Welsh that would be valuable and enhance delivery of high quality and inclusive RSE. No child or young person should be excluded from the delivery of this content, and therefore all guidance, content, materials and resources should be translated with support from the Welsh Government in order to do this. There are many excellent RSE resources available to help support teachers to deliver high quality RSE to learners, and also to engage parents. However, many of these resources are not available in Welsh. The Welsh Government should therefore also look at the possibility of translating existing appropriate resources as well as resources that are produced as part of the new curriculum. Indeed, if resources and materials are to be produced to engage parents (who may feel strongly against not including a right to withdraw in the new curriculum) as we suggest, it is important that these resources are also produced in Welsh in order to involve them in the public engagement work that will be necessary if the proposed change is implemented.



**Question 6** – Please also explain how you believe the proposed plan could be formulated or changed so as to have:

- i) positive effects or increased positive effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language
- ii) no adverse effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

**Supporting comments**

See answer above

**Question 7** – We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them.

While schools are expected to involve parents in the planning and delivery of RSE, there are no best practice guidelines available and few RSE programmes manage to successfully engage parents as participants (Aventin, Maguire, Clarke and Lohan, 2015). Whilst we have highlighted some of the research evidence concerning involving parents in RSE and their child’s education more broadly, there are still significant evidence gaps in this field concerning how to do this effectively. For example, a small amount of research on digital interventions for parents shows they have the potential to be effective (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2015; Guilamo-Ramos *et al.*, 2015; Santa Maria *et al.*, 2015), but there is a dearth of interventions and research using online and mobile technologies to engage parents. Before implementing such a legislative change, the Welsh Government should consider investment into research exploring how to engage parents in RSE and how to equip teachers to do so. This could also be achieved through consideration of the co-production and pilot testing of an online/digital resource with parents, teachers and young people, which could be fully evaluated in the context of the proposed change to provide valuable research evidence on how to effectively engage parents in RSE.

The Welsh Government should also consider ways to evaluate the impact of such a legislative change and the already existing measures/data sources through which this could be done: for example, the numbers of disclosures of safeguarding issues in schools, the numbers of learners reporting experiences of dating and relationship violence, reported incidences of sexting etc.

Responses to consultations are likely to be made public, on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to remain anonymous, please tick here:

