

Barnardo's Northern Ireland

**Relationships and Sexuality Education
Department of Education (DE)**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. Every year we work with more than 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 different services and programmes. We are a leading provider of schools-based support, reaching more than 32,000 children in schools across the UK and Ireland through our NI-managed social and emotional literacy programmes.

We deliver a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to provide our response to the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Consultation Booklets. Our comments are informed by our work with the diverse communities of children and families that we support through our 45+ services in Northern Ireland. It is important that both strategies speak to, and meet the needs of, the wide range of experiences in Northern Ireland.

For example, The Barnardo's NI LifeSkills programme is a universal, highly effective, early intervention and prevention programme, designed for whole class, in-school delivery for 8-14 year olds. LifeSkills concentrates on a preventative approach which shares age-appropriate information with children and young people, providing them with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to make healthy choices. Studies have shown that LifeSkills can reduce the prevalence of risk-taking behaviours by up to 75%, with effects lasting 12 years¹. The LifeSkills programme builds capacity by equipping teachers with the skills to prevent risky behaviours.

¹ For more information on LifeSkills, see '[LifeSkills - Findings from the implementation of Botvin LifeSkills within North Down and Ards](#)' (2019)

1. General comments

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes this consultation and understands the complexity in what Departments of Education (the department) is trying to achieve by embedding the new legislation. Ahead of Northern Ireland Assembly Elections, Barnardo's NI expressed the need to work collaboratively across the public, private, and community and voluntary sectors to help transform the lives of the most vulnerable children in Northern Ireland. We want to work together to build: Stronger families; safer childhoods and positive futures².
- 1.2. Barnardo's NI strongly believes that providing mandatory, standardised, and age-appropriate Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in all schools as part of the core curriculum would play a key role in educating young people about healthy relationships, consent and boundaries. It should encompass evidence-based topics such as mental health, wellbeing, digital citizenship (including online safety) and resilience. Our call to action regarding RSE was to develop and implement a standardised RSE curriculum for all schools.
- 1.3. While RSE has been a statutory component of the primary and post-primary school curriculum in Northern Ireland since 2001, programme content and delivery are determined by individual schools. Prior to the update in legislation, the approach to RSE was largely based on the school's interpretation of guidelines issued by CCEA, framed by the ethos of the school. This has resulted in large inconsistencies between schools in Northern Ireland in the quality of RSE provided and the content of the RSE programmes.
- 1.4. The recent update in legislation only covers Key Stages 3 and 4 to provide age-appropriate and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.³ It therefore provides the department an opportunity to ensure standardised evidenced based provision of RSE throughout Northern Ireland.
- 1.5. In order to support our children to grow up to become resilient adults, we need to equip them with the skills and knowledge to understand consent and healthy relationships, as well as challenging myths and stereotypes. For example, Barnardo's *The PATHS® Programme for*

² <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/northern-ireland/influencing/barnardos-ni-2022-manifesto-assembly-children>

³ [The Relationships and Sexuality Education \(Northern Ireland\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2023](#) amended the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order 2007 (Northern Ireland) to add additional topics to the RSE curriculum at Key Stages 3&4.

Schools is a universal, social emotional learning (SEL) school programme for 4-11 year olds which empowers all children to develop the fundamental SEL skills which will enable them to make positive choices throughout life. The *PATHS® Programme* promotes positive mental health and emotional well-being in primary schools and is delivered through resources, training and coaching support from Barnardo's. The *PATHS® Programme* team deliver support across all council areas in Northern Ireland.⁴

- 1.6. Studies have measured the impact of the *PATHS® Programme* including improved social and emotional skills, attitudes/relationships, emotional wellbeing, prosocial behaviours, conduct problems and academic performance⁵. The programme builds the foundation of healthy development, helps to create and embed a whole school approach to mental health and empowers children and young people to understand their feelings and those of their peers, and provides them with the tools to understand when they might need help or support to manage them.

2. Section A: Consultation on DE's Guidance on the change to legislation on the change to legislation – curriculum content at Key Stages 3 and 4

- 2.1. The Secretary of State is required to ensure that the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the 2018 report of the UN Committee on the Ending of Discrimination Against Women ("the CEDAW Report") are implemented in respect of Northern Ireland. Paragraphs 85 and 86 recommended a change to the law around sexual and reproductive health, rights and services. Specifically, paragraph 86(d) requires the United Kingdom Government to "Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory curriculum component for adolescents, covering early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion".
- 2.2. As the prevalence of mental health issues increase in children and young people, preventative teaching and whole school approaches to mental health are vital to prevent children and young people reaching crisis point. Health promotion, prevention and early intervention may

⁴ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-support/services/pathsr-programme-schools-uk-ni-version>

⁵ Shi J, Cheung ACK, Ni A. (2022) The effectiveness of Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies program: A meta-analysis. *Front Psychol.*

have the greatest impact on mental health and wellbeing⁶. Childhood is particularly important in developing the foundations of wellbeing⁷, establishing the ability to cope and adapt in the result of life events that impact on wellbeing and support help seeking behaviours⁸. Good quality RSE has an important role to play in addressing and preventing harmful sexual behaviour in children. Children who display harmful sexual behaviour should be treated as children first and foremost.

- 2.3. Rather than regarding this as a justice matter, this is a safeguarding issue and children who display harmful sexual behaviour should be referred to appropriate early intervention services to prevent the escalation of these behaviours and address the underlying factors. We believe that prevention, via effective early intervention, based on understanding the motivators and causes is an effective approach. Therefore Barnardo's NI urges the department to ensure that all changes to curriculum are effectively resourced.
- 2.4. Barnardo's NI agrees that the content of teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA should be compliant with the CEDAW recommendations in being factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and abortion for Key Stages 3 & 4. We reiterate our call for a universal approach to its implementation.

- 3. Section B: Consultation on DE's Guidance to support the change to legislation – Parental opt-out from lesson(s) on sexual and reproductive health and rights covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.**

- 3.1. Barnardo's NI agrees that parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of age appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on the sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.

⁶ Colizzi, M., Lasalvia, A. & Ruggeri, M. Prent(2020) early intervention in youth mental health: is it time for a multidisciplinary and trans-diagnostic model for care?. *Int J Ment Health Syst* 14, 23.

⁷ Black MM, Walker SP, Fernald LCH, Andersen CT, DiGirolamo AM, Lu C, et al. Early childhood development coming of age: science through the life course. *Lancet*. 2017;389(10064):77–90.

⁸ Colizzi, M., Lasalvia, A. & Ruggeri, M. Prevention and early intervention in youth mental health: is it time for a multidisciplinary and trans-diagnostic model for care?. *Int J Ment Health Syst* 14, 23 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-020-00356-9>

- 3.2. RSE is a key part of the curriculum for children, helping to teach children about healthy relationships, online safety, signs of grooming and abuse, and topics like consent and bullying. We think it is important that schools and teachers engage and involve parents in RSE lessons and curriculum, so that parents can understand what their children are going to be taught, and what potential questions their children may have as a result.
- 3.3. Whilst this consultation is specifically relevant to pupils in Key Stage 3 & 4, Barnardo's NI recommends that all children should have access to age appropriate, evidenced based, inclusive RSE policy. Planned programmes and curriculum should be universal regardless of education background and sector they attend.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to such an important consultation and would be keen to engage with the department as the guidelines are developed further.

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