



Written evidence submitted by Make it Mandatory, Sex Education Forum, End Violence Against Women Coalition and Brook to the Bill Committee: Children's Wellbeing & Schools Bill (CWSB45)

The case for extending statutory RSHE to 16-18 education

Introduction

The Women and Equalities Select Committee set out the rationale for extending Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) into post-16 education settings in their 2023 report on 'Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings':

“RSHE is compulsory in secondary schools up to the age of 16, however young people are required to remain in some form of education until they are 18. This leaves young people making their first steps in the adult world under-supported and less equipped to navigate potentially harmful and dangerous situations and keep themselves safe and healthy in relationships. RSHE should be extended to young people in post-16 educational settings.”

Women and Equalities Select Committee Report into '[Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings](#)', 2023, Fifth Report of Session 2022-23

There is a clear case for closing the gap in legislation so that RSHE is provided throughout a child's education up to the age of 18, no matter what type of educational setting the child attends.

This written evidence is submitted by Make it Mandatory, Sex Education Forum, End Violence Against Women Coalition and Brook. Further information about our organisations is provided at the end of the document.

1. The benefits from gaining statutory status for RSHE in primary and secondary schools

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 (See Appendix) gave statutory status to Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE), and this requirement was implemented from September

2020 and fully from September 2021 (following delays due to Covid-19). Many primary and secondary schools already taught some aspects of RSHE, but statutory status has led to improvements in the breadth and depth of delivery of this crucial subject. Similarly, some further education and sixth form colleges already teach aspects of RSHE, but statutory status would lead to accountability, consistency and improvements in provision.

The Sex Education Forum's annual poll of 1000 young people aged 16 and 17 years old ([SEF, 2024](#)) shows an increase in young people's overall satisfaction with RSHE, with fifty percent rating their RSE at school as 'good' or 'very good' in 2024. This is up ten percentage points on the 2022 (SEF, 2023) poll and the highest percentage since our polling began. This positive trend is mirrored across individual RSE topics; all seventeen topics listed in the poll – from puberty to healthy relationships - returned higher percentages of young people reporting 'yes' they learnt all that they needed to, compared to previous polls.

2. The health and wellbeing of young people aged 16-18

The 16-18 age-group is a critical period for young people on their journey to adulthood and independence, with many young people starting intimate and sexual relationships for the first time. The number of incidents of domestic abuse and poor sexual health are very high amongst this age group, and there is a steep increase in online safety concerns:

- Young people in the age group 15 to 24 years are the most likely to be diagnosed with the most common types of STI ([WEC Report, 2024](#)). The average age of first sexual intercourse is 16 years old ([Natsal-3](#))
- [Statistics from ONS](#) (for year ending March 2023) show that the proportion of people who were victims of domestic abuse in the past year were higher for the 16-19 age group (at 8%) than any other age group.
- 79% of young people have accessed violent pornography by the age of 18 ([Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2023](#))
- Around 6% of 12 to 16 year olds say they do not feel safe at all online. **This doubles to around 12% of those aged 17 to 21.** 62% of girls aged 17-21 said they felt that "education to change the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women" would help them feel safer and more protected. (Plan International '[State of Girls' Rights' Report](#))
- The Association of Colleges' [Mental Health Report 2024](#) found that social media was the joint highest influence on student mental health (82%) equal to home circumstances. Other significant influences include drugs and alcohol misuse (62%), gender identity (62%), and exam pressure (54%). In the survey, colleges outlined the challenges associated with students demonstrating under-developed core social skills, difficulties with managing relationships, and an increase in social anxiety.

This age group will also be starting to access health services independently, often for the first time. At the point at which help and advice is needed, it's crucial that young people are informed about their rights and the practicalities of accessing services and how to find reliable information.

Post-16 education providers are ideally positioned to play a preventative and health-promoting role both through pastoral provision but also through taught lessons in the curriculum.

3. Existing legislation and guidance – how 16-18 falls through the gap

There are several different types of education setting for 16-18 education, including schools with Sixth Forms, Sixth Form Colleges, FE Colleges and apprenticeship providers.

Currently it is mandatory only for schools with Sixth Forms to provide RSHE to all of their students including those attending the sixth form, however there is no curriculum content specified for these students as the content of the statutory RSHE guidance specifies what should be covered by the end of secondary education. There is also an absence of monitoring of what RSHE has been delivered for students aged 16-18 attending schools with Sixth Forms.

There is no legislative requirement for sixth form colleges or FE colleges to deliver an RSE curriculum. Some colleges have chosen to deliver RSE as part of their pastoral and safeguarding offer. However, there is a dearth of information and research into how common it is for RSE or broader RSHE to be taught in Sixth form colleges, FE colleges and other 16-18 education settings.

The Statutory **safeguarding guidance** '[Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)' applies to schools and colleges and refers to the importance of a preventative curriculum. Schools are advised to follow the [statutory RSHE guidance](#) to deliver on this, whereas the expectations for colleges are vague, stating in paragraph 129: 'Colleges may cover relevant issues through tutorials'.

Colleges were given scant attention in the **Ofsted review into '[Sexual abuse and sexual harassment in schools and colleges](#)'** as the review was based on visits to 30 schools and only 2 colleges. Many of the recommendations in the report are directed to colleges, but colleges do not have the statutory RSHE framework that schools have, so it is unclear what the minimum expectation is for colleges.

The dearth of data about the lived experience of students in 16-18 education is a concern highlighted in the '[Opportunity England](#)' vision paper on Mental Health in Colleges (2024) set out by Association of Colleges. There is little dedicated research into the lived experience of staff and students in FE, which is needed to highlight the extent and impact of mental health issues on wellbeing, learning and employment.

The Office for Students is making it [a condition of registration for universities](#) to set out how they intend to prevent and address sexual violence, reflecting the high prevalence of sexual violence amongst students. Ensuring all young people can access RSHE in the years **before** they reach universities is an essential part of an effective prevention strategy.

4. Existing RSE provision in 16-18 settings including students with SEND

Some FE colleges and sixth form colleges are already providing RSE to their students, for example BHASVIC college delivers a 'curriculum' that all learners must attend for one hour each week on their timetable, delivered by specialist 'Personal Progress Tutors'. This covers personal development/PSHE topics with a spiral approach including consent, healthy relationships and contraception. A case-study explaining the BHASVIC approach to RSE was presented at the Sex Education Forum autumn members' event (14 November 2024) and sourcing other case-studies would demonstrate the range of models of current practice and ways of supporting a consistent, high quality RSHE offer for young people 16-19.

Young people with special educational needs and disabilities are at risk of poorer outcomes in relation to sexual health and greater vulnerability relating to sexual exploitation and abuse (See ['Teaching relationships education to prevent sexual abuse'](#), Alma Economics, 2024). In post-16 education, colleges will be supporting students with SEND through a range of statutory requirements, such as the 'Preparing for Adulthood' (PfA) outcomes. However, little monitoring is in place about whether or not relationships and social skills are addressed through the PfA with students aged 16-18 and beyond, as students with an [Education Health Care \(EHC\) plan will be supported with their preparedness for adulthood up to the age of 25](#).

The need for a focused lens on meeting the RSHE needs of pupils with SEND was established through the **IICSA report** ([Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022](#)), **which includes the recommendation (#61)** to 'Ensure there is safeguarding training and effective relationships, sex and health education in schools' and called on The Department for Education and the Welsh Government to: 'undertake an urgent review in order to improve the provision and effectiveness of relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) for children with special educational needs and disabilities, both for children who are in mainstream settings and for those in special schools'.

Because there is no statutory obligation to provide RSHE for pupils with SEND there are many young people who are not receiving the protective, tailored RSHE support that they need over the age of 16, at a point when vulnerability is very high.

5. A right to preventative education up to the age of 18

Under the [Convention on the Rights of a Child](#), a child is any person under the age of 18. Under the Istanbul Convention (of which the UK government is a signatory), signatories commit to teaching about equality (between men and women) in formal curricula and at all levels of education (Article 14, Education). Currently England is not providing a continuous approach throughout all years of a child's education.

Internationally, among adolescent girls who have been in a relationship, nearly a quarter (24%) – close to 19 million – will have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence by

the time they turn 20 years old ([WHO / Lancet](#)). International bodies including UNESCO conclude that relationships and sex education is a proven tool in prevention ([SEF, 2022](#)).

Building on the historic legislation which made RSHE statutory through the Children and Social Work Act 2017 there is a further opportunity for England to demonstrate a world-leading approach on children's rights and prevention.

6. Support for extending RSHE

- **The majority of young people** support extending RSHE: 1000 young people aged 16 and 17 were surveyed through the Sex Education Forum's RSE poll 2024 and were four times more likely to support continuing RSE beyond Year 11 (56%) than to disagree with an extension (14%).
- **The Women and Equality Select Committee** has recommended that RSHE be extended. Witnesses called to the inquiry into the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (in 2024) support extending RSHE post-16 including Professor **Sir Chris Whitty**, Chief Medical Officer for England, **Dame Rachel de Souza**, Children's Commissioner for England, and **Dr Claire Dewsnap**, President of BASSH.

'53. We asked witnesses whether there was merit in extending the teaching of RSE to 18. They all agreed. Dr Dewsnap told us "It should definitely go on to 18. Also, the variation in people maturing is so huge [...]. Some kids will not be receptive at 15."

Women and Equality Select Committee (2024) '[The prevalence of sexually transmitted infections in young people and other high risk groups](#)' Fifth Report of Session 2023–24

- **95,081** people signed a petition, started in 2022 by Make it Mandatory, calling for the extension of statutory RSE to Key Stage 5. ([Change.org](#))
- **Voluntary sector organisations** support Make it Mandatory's call to extend statutory RSHE to post-16 including Refuge, Women's Aid, End Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition, Sex Education Forum Brook, Girlguiding, Tender, The Eve Appeal, Childnet and Sexpression: UK.
- **16 Members of Parliament** signed an [Early Day Motion](#) calling for mandatory RSE in sixth form in 2022

Faustine Petron, founder of Make it Mandatory explains:

"I am a university student and young survivor of domestic abuse. As an older teenager, I would have benefited from being provided with RSE after year 11 and an adequate

education surrounding the early warning signs of domestic abuse, the different forms abuse can take, and places to get help.”

7. The time for change is now

With the Government’s pledge to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, and the, 79% of young people having encountered violent pornography by the age of 18,

The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill presents the ideal opportunity to close the gap and ensure that all children are provided with their entitlement to a protective and comprehensive education about healthy relationships and sexual health, throughout their years of education.

The Bill coincides with ongoing work to update the [statutory RSHE guidance \(2019\)](#), and will move in parallel with the Curriculum & Assessment Review, which includes post-16 education within its scope. Updated RSHE guidance can provide a flexible framework for RSHE in Key Stage 5, building on the sort of sequential approach which Ofsted has recommended for Key Stages 1-4.

To support the successful implementation of legislation to extend RSHE it will be vital to invest in adequate training for college tutors and other staff working in post-16 settings and to establish monitoring of provision which centres young people’s views and experiences.

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About the Sex Education Forum

Sex Education Forum is a charity that brings together over 70 Partner organisations to make sure the RSE young people get is right for them and is the best it can be. We train educators and share research with teachers, school leaders and policy-makers.

About Make it Mandatory

Make It Mandatory is a multi-award-winning, grassroots, and youth-led campaign with nearly 100,000 signatures. Founded by young survivor of teenage domestic abuse, Faustine Petron, the campaign calls on the Government to extend Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and holds them accountable for the prevention of teenage relationship abuse.

About Brook

Brook is the UK sexual health charity, providing clinical sexual healthcare, and delivering and supporting high quality RSE in England and Wales.

About the End Violence Against Women Coalition

End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) is a membership organisation representing over 160 specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) services, researchers, survivors and NGOs working to end VAWG in all its forms. We carry out policy and campaigns work across all levels of government to address the social and political systems that enable violence against women.

Appendix: Children and Social Work Act 2017

Chapter 4, Section 34, and see also Section 35

Education relating to relationships and sex

(1) The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision requiring—

(a) relationships education to be provided to pupils of compulsory school age receiving **primary** education at schools in England;

(b) relationships and sex education to be provided (instead of sex education) to pupils receiving **secondary** education at schools in England.

(2) The regulations must include provision—

(a) requiring the Secretary of State to give guidance to proprietors of schools in relation to the provision of the education and to review the guidance from time to time;

(b) requiring proprietors of schools to have regard to the guidance;

(c) requiring proprietors of schools to make statements of policy in relation to the education to be provided, and to make the statements available to parents or other persons;

(d) about the circumstances in which a pupil (or a pupil below a specified age) is to be excused from receiving relationships and sex education or specified elements of that education.

(3) The regulations must provide that guidance given by virtue of subsection (2)(a) is to be given with a view to ensuring that when relationships education or relationships and sex education is given—

(a) the pupils learn about—

(i) safety in forming and maintaining relationships,

(ii) the characteristics of healthy relationships, and

(iii) how relationships may affect physical and mental health and well-being, and

(b) the education is appropriate having regard to the age and the religious background of the pupils.

(4) The regulations may make further provision in connection with the provision of relationships education, or relationships and sex education.

(5) Before making the regulations, the Secretary of State must consult such persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(6) The regulations may amend any provision (including provision conferring powers) that is made by or under—

(a) section 342 of the Education Act 1996;

(b) Chapter 4 of Part 5 of the Education Act 1996;

(c) Schedule 1 to the Education Act 1996;

(d) Part 6 of the Education Act 2002;

(e) Chapter 1 of Part 4 of the Education and Skills Act 2008;

(f)the Academies Act 2010.

(7)Any duty to make provision by regulations under subsection (1) may be discharged by making that provision by regulations under another Act, so long as the Secretary of State consults such persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate before making the regulations under that Act.

(8)The provision that may be made by regulations under subsection (1) by virtue of section 67 includes, in particular, provision amending, repealing or revoking any provision made by or under any Act or any other instrument or document (whenever passed or made).

(9)Regulations under subsection (1) which amend provision made by or under an Act are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.

(10)Other regulations under subsection (1) are subject to the negative resolution procedure.

(11)Expressions used in this section, where listed in the left-hand column of the table in section 580 of the Education Act 1996, are to be interpreted in accordance with the provisions of that Act listed in the right-hand column in relation to those expressions.

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