

BHA response to SEF PSHE Review survey November 2011

**British Humanist Association response
to the [Sex Education Forum's PSHE Review survey](#)**



The Sex Education Forum (SEF)'s final response is [also available](#).

Question 1

a) SEF believes that the core outcomes of PSHE education are:

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is a member of the SEF and support these core outcomes of PSHE. A vital task for all schools is the moral education of children, which includes the encouragement of understanding and respect between different groups in society. As part of a broader curriculum including RE and Citizenship, PSHE has an important role to play in this.

We believe that these core outcomes embrace that perspective of a broad and balanced curriculum.

We believe that SRE should be compulsory at both primary and secondary levels, taught in a sensitive, informative, and age appropriate way. Therefore, we would suggest that the core outcomes of personal identity, healthy, safer lifestyles, and relationships education should be taught from earlier levels than career and economic understanding, and financial capability, or at least given a stronger emphasis in the curriculum at earlier levels. Economic understanding and financial capability education are certainly important but perhaps more applicable to the lives of older students, unlike relationships.

We do think that PSHE and SRE should be evidence-based and objective, whether taught by teachers or external providers. This would include teaching children and young people about what the law says, such as the age of consent, about marriage and civil partnership, about legal sexual behaviour and so on.

We are deeply concerned that Academies and Free Schools have an opt-out from teaching even the most basic sex education. The national curriculum, while not including statutory Sex and Relationships Education (SRE), does ensure that maintained 'faith' schools teach sexual reproduction as part of the science syllabus. Nothing in the new, deregulated system obliges religious Academies to do the same. There is a real risk that religious Academies will deny their pupils objective SRE on religious grounds. For example, a new, state-funded, Catholic Academy might be allowed not to teach sexual reproduction in biology lessons, let alone wider and objective sex and relationships education.

Educational experts, children's rights organisations, parents, teachers and young people themselves have been calling for many years for compulsory SRE that is comprehensive, objective and high quality, and this was also the recommendation of the Government's review of Sex and Relationships Education in 2008. The former parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) regarded the provision of mandatory SRE as a 'significant human rights enhancing measure' (*Joint Committee on Human Rights (2009) Legislative Scrutiny: Children Schools and Families Bill; Other bills. Eighth Report of Session 2009-10. 19 February 2010, HL Paper 57, HC 369.*) The BHA agrees that pupils have a right to good, comprehensive and objective PSHE. We believe that for as long as the subject is voluntary many faith Academies will deny their pupils this right. We were greatly disappointed when the provisions to make PSHE a statutory requirement in all schools was dropped from the Children,

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Schools and Families Bill earlier this year, not least as it was a provision that had cross-party support in parliament.

PSHE should be provided as a statutory entitlement to children in all state-funded schools, including Academies and free schools. We believe this not only as a matter of principle but because of the proven benefits of such teaching to the health, well-being and safety of children and young people.

b) SEF believes that the basic core knowledge and awareness pupils should be expected to acquire at school through SRE in the context of PSHE education is:

The BHA is a member of the SEF and finds the core knowledge taught described and taught by age appropriate bands helpful and we would support that way of determining the curriculum. We also broadly agree with the content suggested above. However, in line with an evidenced approach to education and teaching, we would also want there to be flexibility in what is taught in an age appropriate way. For example, learning about menstruation is banded for ages 11-13 but if educationally and based on evidence it was agreed that girls and boys would benefit from learning about it (or any other topic) at an earlier age, we would likely support it. In addition, it is not totally clear where issues around unplanned pregnancy would fit in the curriculum as described above. We support a comprehensive curriculum for PSHE including SRE and that would necessarily include information about post-conception services, including abortion, and necessarily taught in an objective way in all state-funded schools, including in 'faith' schools.

The relationships section of the core SRE knowledge, for ages 11-13, contains "know about norms in teenage sexual behaviour and different religious and cultural attitudes". We understand that 'norms' refers to issues such as the age of consent. However, given the language is not totally clear, we would support revision that would make clear the legal status of sex and information giving of evidence about sexual activity, particularly to counter media representations of sexual activity amongst young people and what is the perceived 'norm'. In relation to different religious and cultural attitudes, and in line with equalities and human rights law and good practice, we would like any teaching of those subjects to include non-religious, including humanist, perspectives, and certainly for any religion or belief, or cultural views to be presented in an objective and critical way, and never in a 'confessional' way or as instruction.

For ages 14-16, the relationships section includes "know about influences on sexual decision making such as the law, different cultures and religious beliefs, pornography, the media and the effects of drugs and alcohol". It is good that this appears comprehensive but we would restate our perspective that we expect all schools, including state-funded 'faith' schools, to teach in ways that are evidence-based and objective, and certainly not to teach that any one religious perspective is the proper or correct perspective on an issue. It is really important that children and young people are presented with factual information, not least if they have not been offered alternative perspectives to that of their parents or cultural/religious background. This does not mean that schools cannot be flexible but it would rule out, for example, a school with a Catholic ethos being able to present SRE from Church doctrine in ways that are homophobic.

Question 2

Do you have any evidence that demonstrates why a) existing elements and b) new elements should be part of SRE within the PSHE education curriculum? Your answer should provide a summary of the evidence and where appropriate contain the title, author and publication date of

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research. (SEF's evidence is from surveys, case studies and evidence briefings. We need further up-to-date evidence to draw from)

The BHA is not a provider of PSHE or SRE in schools. However, we are a leading organisation campaigning for curriculum and legislative reform. We are a membership organisation and our work to have PSHE including SRE made compulsory, including in 'faith' schools, has support from our membership and wider support base, with many taking action to write to their MPs in support of our policy. In addition, we have worked closely with MPs and Peers from across all parties to reform legislation in like with our policy, and have enjoyed wide support. We also work with other organisations, such as the Children's Rights Alliance for England, on specific issues such as ending the parental opt-out for SRE. These demonstrate support for making high quality, comprehensive and age-appropriate PSHE and SRE statutory parts of the basic curriculum.

Question 3

- a) SEF believes that the core outcomes of PSHE education as outlined in question 1a) should be made a statutory entitlement within the basic curriculum.**

Agree.

- b) SEF believes that the existing legislation governing sex education should be extended in the following ways:**

- i) Sex education becomes sex and relationships education.**

Agree.

We fully endorse the SEF's position that it is vital all young people, including those in Academies and Free Schools, have a statutory right to learn about how to respect one another, form friendships and care for one another; why bullying including homophobic bullying is wrong; and about different forms of relationship, including marriage and civil partnership treated on an equal footing.

Homophobic is a major issue in all schools, but is a particular issue in 'faith' schools. Stonewall's 2007 'The School Report' showed that two thirds of young gay people at secondary schools have experienced homophobic bullying, but in 'faith' schools that figure rises to three in four. The report also showed that lesbian and gay pupils who attend 'faith' schools are 23% less likely to report bullying than those at other schools.¹ Many 'faith' schools also have issues with teaching about relationships other than heterosexual relationships, and it is important that different sexual orientations are treated equally including in issues to do with marriage and civil partnership.

Again, we are deeply concerned that Academies and Free Schools have an opt-out from teaching even the most basic sex education, which is required in maintained schools. We would want to see SRE become statutory in all schools, not just maintained schools.

¹ See 'The School Report', Stonewall, 2007

http://www.stonewall.org.uk/education_for_all/research/1790.asp

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ii) There is a duty on all schools to provide sex and relationships education from Foundation stage/KS1.

Agree.

It is certainly important that SRE is age-appropriate; however there is absolutely a place for SRE in primary schools. The BHA believe that good SRE in primary schools should focus on friendships, relationships, personal wellbeing and going through puberty. It is vital that children are equipped with the knowledge they need to ensure they make informed, healthy decisions throughout life.

Once more, we would want to ensure that the legislation is extended to cover Academies and Free Schools, as well as maintained schools.

iii) In planning SRE programmes, schools should give due regard to the core SRE knowledge and awareness as set out in question 1b).

Agree.

Good quality, age-appropriate SRE is known to reduce unwanted pregnancies, to reduce the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and equip young people with the language and tools to be clear about personal boundaries and understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, to be able to resist pressure assertively and to know who to talk to and how to ask for help if and when they need it. For older children it helps them resist pressure, make safe choices, and be able to challenge and be critical of misleading and inappropriate messages about sex in the media. National and international research shows that young people who have had good SRE are more likely to choose to have sex for the first time later. When they do have sex they are more likely to use condoms and contraception².

We believe that all children are entitled to full, accurate and age-appropriate SRE, including unbiased information on contraception, STIs, abortion, sexual orientation, and the many forms of family relationship conducive to individual fulfilment and the stability of society.

Despite the obvious public health and child rights imperative for SRE, the current situation is that schools do not have to teach any SRE beyond basic information on human reproduction and infectious diseases in the science curriculum. All state maintained schools must also teach about HIV and AIDS however there is no guidance given about what information should be taught. Parents are entitled to withdraw their children from these lessons.

Our firm belief that all children are entitled to essential basic information about human reproduction and physiology in science and to broader and comprehensive SRE elsewhere in the curriculum means that we want it taught as a compulsory subject in all schools from primary age, with no parental opt out.

² See 'Does sex and Relationships education work? A Sex Education Forum evidence briefing'

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Question 4

- a) **SEF believes that if the core outcomes of PSHE education are made statutory within the basic curriculum then the national, non-statutory frameworks and programmes of study are an effective way of defining content.**

Disagree.

We agree that the non-statutory frameworks and programmes of study are on the whole effective, but believe they could provide more detail on matters related to SRE, as the SEF does in its core knowledge and awareness. Furthermore, we do have some specific concerns, most surrounding religion and belief but one of which is related to SRE.

In 'Range and Content': k (page 249), 'marriage' is mentioned here but not 'civil partnerships' – we believe this should be added. We note that civil partnerships are included in j (and in the Key Stage 4 programme of study), and believe they should be mentioned in k as well.

- b) **SEF believes that the frameworks should be updated and reorganised into a single framework to align with the revised National Curriculum subject frameworks.**

Agree.

Question 5

- a) **SEF believes that SRE should be based on the actual needs of children and young people so that it is relevant to their lives. Children and young people can be consulted through focus groups, questionnaires, discussion in class and the school council.**

The British Humanist Association wholly endorses this statement, as we believe that every young child has a right to high-quality, comprehensive sex and relationships education. As previously stated, the BHA are a member of the Children's Rights Alliance for England, who we have worked with on ending the parental opt-out for SRE.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children in education should be prepared for 'responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups...'.¹

- b) **SEF believes that schools and parents should work together on the SRE policy and programme to make sure children and young people get the information and support they need.**

We would again emphasise that all children should receive high-quality, comprehensive and age-appropriate sex and relationships education. Schools and parents certainly often play a valuable role in supporting SRE, but we would be wary of giving them too much ability to

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influence the SRE policy and programme of the school, as some may seek to deny children aspects of SRE.

- c) SEF believes that local priorities and the views of SRE/sexual health professionals should be taken into account by schools when developing the SRE policy and programme.**

Disagree.

SRE/sexual health professionals are by definition the experts on providing high quality SRE and therefore we believe their views should absolutely be taken into account when developing SRE. However, we are concerned that considering local priorities is likely in practice to mean considering local religious priorities, and are worried about the influence of religious groups in opposing age-appropriate SRE due to particular religious beliefs that are at odds with the best available evidence. We believe all children have an identical entitlement nationwide and do not see that local priorities should be taken into account.

Question 6

SEF believes that the statutory guidance on sex and relationships education (DfEE 2000) could be simplified by:

- a) Including an age-related framework for SRE (as in question 1b))**

Agree.

- b) Updating the age-related framework, from Foundation stage/KS1 onwards, to:**

- i) Strengthen the priority given to teaching about relationships**

Agree.

- ii) Include the importance of positive parenting**

Agree.

- iii) Include teaching young people about sexual consent**

Agree.

Generally, we supported the draft 2010 guidance on PSHE and would like to see updates to guidance in line with that.

- c) Are there additional SRE issues that should be given greater emphasis in the updated framework?**

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We would object to the references to a school's religious ethos leading to other teaching. There are two in the guidance, on page 8: 1. "Schools of a particular religious ethos may choose to reflect that in their sex and relationship education policy" 2. "There are strongly held views and religious beliefs about abortion and some schools will apply a particular religious ethos through their sex and relationship education policy to the issue which will enable pupils to consider the moral and personal dilemmas involved. The religious convictions of pupils and their parents should be respected."

We are also concerned that there are a number of references to marriage (on pages 4, 5 and 11) that do not also refer to civil partnership. Pages 5, 12-13 and 28 also preclude the "promotion of sexual orientation". It should be made clearer that different sexualities should be taught about, but at the same time, the statements that sexual orientation should be promoted should be removed.

We believe that, like other state-funded schools, 'faith' schools should be required to teach SRE accurately, in ways that are balanced, promote equality and respect for diversity, and reflect different views. Allowing schools to teach SRE in ways skewed towards their religious character could in practice lead to subjective and narrow teaching and the BHA is particularly concerned how faith schools will teach about crucial issues such as contraception, safe sex, and different sexualities.

We believe that all children have a right to full, comprehensive, objective SRE that promotes equality and encourages acceptance of diversity. We believe this not only as a matter of principle but because of the proven benefits of such teaching to the health, well-being and safety of children and young people.

We want any revised and updated curriculum and guidance to be entitlement-based, which would prevent individual schools from teaching SRE in ways that are not objective or evidence-based.

Question 7

Do you have any examples of case studies that show particular best practice in teaching SRE in the context of PSHE education and achieving the outcomes we want for PSHE education?

Your answer should be evidence based and provide details of real-life case studies (For examples please see case studies on SEF website)

Question 8

- a) SEF believes that SRE should be taught by trained teachers and that the support of relevant external agencies can add value.**
- b)**
- c) SEF believes that the following levers are necessary to improve the quality of SRE:**
 - Set criteria for a national standard for best practice in schools**
 - Resume the ITT pilot to train specialist PSHE teachers**
 - Give greater prominence and support to the National Accredited PSHE education CPD**

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Programme

- **Identify PSHE centres of excellence in Teaching Schools ensuring all new teachers are equipped to teach PSHE**
- **Introduce of kitemark register for external agencies (public, private and voluntary)**

Agree.

Although we would caveat this with the need for having proper mechanisms in place to stop groups with religious or political agendas from being invited to teach SRE in schools. Education for Choice have highlighted the dangers of allowing groups such as SPUC into schools, which present a distinctly subjective position, often without evidence, on abortion and other issues as fact. That kind of 'education' can be greatly damaging to young people.

d) Can SRE be improved using any other levers?

Question 9

Do you have any examples of good practice in assessing and tracking pupils' progress in SRE in in the context of PSHE education?

Your answer should be evidence based and provide details of real-life case studies

Question 10

SEF believes that schools should define and account for SRE's outcomes to pupils, parents and local people by:

- i) Developing comprehensive schemes of work for SRE based on the core knowledge and awareness set out in question 1b)**
- ii) Including PSHEe/SRE in the school's assessment policy, identifying learning outcomes and building assessment procedures into all plans and schemes of work**
- iii) Reporting on progress in SRE (as part of PSHE) at parents / carers meetings and as a subject in end of term/year reports.**
- iv) Monitoring the delivery of the SRE programme and seeking the views of all stakeholders, including pupils, in evaluating its impact and effectiveness.**

Agree.

Yes but the focus must be on prioritising, promoting and protecting the rights of children and young people to high quality, objective and comprehensive SRE.

Question 11

Are there any additional comments you would like to make about nature or quality of SRE provision?

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We refer to our position statement under question 1.