



Merched Cymru Senedd Briefing Curriculum for Wales – Relationships and Sexuality Education Code December 2021

We believe that every child and young person in Wales should have access to high quality, fully inclusive, safe, age appropriate RSE. We had 5 key demands in our response to the Welsh Government Consultation on the Draft RSE Guidance and Code which closed in July this year. You can find out more about those 5 demands here: <https://merchedcymru.wales/rse/>, and download our full response to the consultation here: <https://merchedcymru.wales/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Merched-Cymru-RSE-Guidance-and-Code-consultation-response.pdf>

We are pleased that Welsh Government has extensively revised and improved the draft, but a number of significant flaws remain in the statutory guidance laid with the Senedd. We hope MSs will seek to get the Minister for Education to address these before the new RSE Code is approved and implemented. Our main concerns about the revised RSE Code are:

1 Ensuring appropriate and safe content and delivery

As an absolute minimum, Welsh Government should include an explicit statement in the guidance on what materials are not acceptable, so that teachers can be confident in rejecting unsuitable resources produced by ostensibly credible organisations; and that parents and carers can be assured that their children are receiving accurate, age appropriate, factual information.

Schools in England are already provided with clarity (Department for Education (2020) *Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum – Ensuring content is appropriate* <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-your-relationships-sex-and-health-curriculum>). Similar text should be included in this Curriculum for Wales document (see our response to Q7 in our [full consultation response](#) for suggested wording).

Linked to this should be a central list of approved RSE resources and organisations. This could be held at either a Wales-wide, local authority or consortium level to ensure that materials, lesson plans, partner organisations and trainers have been vetted and DBS checked in line with safeguarding best practice and meet the necessary high standard without ideological bias.

Some materials and resources endorsed by Welsh Government or produced by a number of existing partner organisations do not meet that standard. They do not teach RSE in a neutral, factual way and present ideological beliefs as if they were fact. They are sometimes pro-porn, reinforce damaging gender stereotypes, misrepresent the Equality Act 2010 and are not based on a sound, accurate understanding of child development.

Since the RSE Curriculum is now mandatory, not having these safeguards in place for a sensitive curriculum area presents a serious safeguarding risk and may also mean that some learners are prevented from benefiting from good quality provision because of Welsh Government's failure to reassure concerned parents. If something is compulsory it is reasonable that children and parents know what is being taught.

2 Addressing gender stereotypes, sexism, porn culture and violence against women

The terms male, female, boy and girl are not used at any time in the revised RSE Code. Neither are the words man or woman or pornography. The term 'gender' seems to be used only in relation to personal identity, so there is little scope to explore any other established understanding of the word or the restrictive stereotypes, sexism, early sexualisation, harmful labelling and structural inequalities which the new RSE Curriculum was intended to address when first announced by Welsh Government.

In our consultation response we called for an end to the conflation of the terms sex and gender, to the appropriation of inaccurate terminology, and to the confusion of objective facts with subjective beliefs or theories some people can find helpful in life when trying to make sense of their feelings. There are two sexes and three sexual orientations. Whatever a child or young person's personality, interests, preferred way of dressing or self-expression, the message should be that they are fine as they are - whether they're a boy or a girl. Neither their body nor their personality is 'wrong'.

We also called for specific provision in the Code to address the impact of biological sex, sexism and stereotyping on boys and girls, along with a focus on addressing the additional barriers, harassment, discrimination and risk of harm experienced by girls and young women because they are female.

The [Everyone's Invited](#) project brought into stark relief how sexual abuse and harassment has become normalised in schools, the vast majority perpetrated by boys against girls. The routine misogyny and sexism that girls deal with and the attitudes encouraged and reinforced among boys by a prevailing porn culture means that the challenges and approaches needed are very different. The rights of girls to set and maintain personal boundaries for their privacy, dignity and safety must be emphasised. They do not have to 'be kind' and acquiesce when those boundaries are threatened, whether that is physically, emotionally or sexually. Teaching on the impact of pornography and prostitution should always be developmentally appropriate and from the critical viewpoint of them being manifestations of violence against women.

We are disappointed that Welsh Government has not reverted to the previous title for this curriculum area – Relationships and Sex Education. Using the word 'sexuality' does not, as Welsh Government strangely claims, permit more inclusive and holistic aims. Rather, it emphasises a word - sexuality - that most people associate with adult sexual desire.

The current title is inappropriate for an RSE curriculum that applies to children and young people aged from 3 to 16 years. The reasons given in the draft Guidance for the change of title indicate a political and ideological foundation which would be in breach of the Education Act 1996. It also runs contrary to the Welsh Government's own statement that the RSE curriculum must be 'objective, critical, and pluralistic as to its content and manner of teaching'.

3 Use of ill-defined terms and reclaimed slurs in government policy and legislation

We believe that same-sex and both-sex attraction, relationships and different family structures should be normalised and mainstreamed in teaching RSE. Nevertheless, our lesbian and bisexual members, as well as those working directly with children and young people in their professional lives, object strongly to the frequent use of the acronym LGBTQ+ in the Statutory Guidance and Code.

Not only does the 'Q' lack a legal definition (or even a settled informal definition – does it mean queer or questioning?) but it is offensive to many. People are free to reclaim words which are used as slurs against legally protected groups to which they belong to label themselves in everyday life, if they so wish. But it is not appropriate, not intersectional and is deeply disrespectful for Welsh Government to impose an acronym and label used by only a small minority of a very diverse Welsh LGB and T community and enshrine it in policy and law.

It is hard to imagine that a government would consider including any other so-called 'reclaimed slur' – for disabled people, or people of a particular race or ethnicity, for example - in official documents simply because some younger people (some of whom are not actually lesbian, gay, bi or trans) or a lobby group currently use that term amongst themselves. Teachers should not be misled into teaching learners that the use of the term is generally acceptable.

The addition of '+' to the acronym is ill-advised, meaning that teachers will potentially have to explain and validate infinite sexualities and paraphilias including kink. The imprecise 'other letters that can be added' are either not yet known – in which case why refer to them - or deliberately not specified because it would be obvious that they relate to nothing more than personal preferences and self-defined, possibly short-lived, social identities. To our knowledge, no-one has historically faced oppression or needed legal protection against discrimination for being 'questioning', 'asexual', 'demiromantic' or an 'ally'. Without wishing to be alarmist, it is worth noting that there are already known campaigns to have other letters added to the expanded acronym, including P or M (for paedophilia or MAPs - Minor Attracted Persons) and Z (for Zoophilia). Why open this can of worms in a statutory document? Sticking to established, legally recognised definitions is wiser.

Merched Cymru asks the Welsh Government to ensure that it puts children's and young people's right to receive honest, safe, objective, accurate education on sex and relationships ahead of placating lobby groups with a particular ideological agenda. Members of the Senedd should consider our concerns carefully before approving what is still an inadequate RSE Code.