Relationships and sex education; a briefing for councillors
Promoting good sexual health is our responsibility

April 2013 marks the transfer of responsibility for Public Health functions, including the commissioning of sexual health services, to local government. The Public Health Outcomes Framework (2013-16) sets out expectations to improve the wider determinants of health and prevent premature mortality.

High quality relationships and sex education throughout school life provides a universal opportunity to promote healthy lifestyles and behaviours, and needs to be part of a strategic approach to prevention led by local government.

Investment in relationships and sex education for children and young people will impact on the following indicators:

- The under 18 conception rate
- Chlamydia diagnosis (15-24 year olds)
- Late diagnosis of HIV
- Violent crime (including sexual violence)

The government Framework for Sexual Health Improvement in England gives clear ambitions for what should be achieved locally. This includes improving knowledge about contraception (for all age groups) and making sure ALL children and young people have high-quality sex and relationships education at school, home and in the community.

Although some schools have excellent relationships and sex education programmes in place, many do not. Schools will want to shape programmes to meet the needs of their pupils, but there is much to do done to help schools that are struggling to get it right and councillors have a vital role to play in this.

Jonathan McShane
Cabinet Member for Health, Social Care & Culture
Labour Councillor for Haggerston
I. What is relationships and sex education*?

Learning about growing up, relationships, sexual health and reproduction. This includes:

• physical development, for example how our bodies change in puberty

• emotions; like how to manage feelings, and

• the social side of it, such as positive and negative influences from friends

The government has given clear backing for high-quality relationships and sex education as part of their plans to create an open and honest culture on sex and relationships (Framework for Sexual Health Improvement, March 2013) and to prioritise the prevention of ill-health.

A broad programme of relationships and sex education that is responsive to the reality of the modern world is vital for safeguarding children and young people from the dangers of exploitation and abuse.

Whatever topic children are learning about in relationships and sex education, teaching should always stress the values of love, respect and care for one another.

The important thing is that the curriculum is broad enough to cover relationships as well as the biological facts about growing up, human reproduction and sexual health. To do this primary and secondary schools need to make provision in their timetables to include SRE every year and have teachers trained to teach the subject well.

*In this briefing we refer to ‘relationships and sex education’. The term RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) is used in some schools and local authorities to reflect the fact that teaching about relationships is the primary objective of the subject. In government guidance, the term Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is used. Some schools have created their own names, for example ‘growing up’ in primary schools, and many schools include SRE within the broader subject of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education.
2. Life-course approach to relationships and sex education

Learning about growing up, sex and relationships starts at an early age and should be built on developmentally to match the maturity of the child. The new Framework for Sexual Health Improvement sets out a ‘life-course’ approach with the ambition that ALL children and young people aged 0-16 receive high quality relationships and sex education. The time-line set out to the right and overleaf maps out the key areas to be covered at each age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age 3-6</th>
<th>Age 9–10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At this age children are interested in forming friendships and talking about family. They want to know the differences between boys and girls, naming body parts, where babies come from. What areas of the body are private and who they can talk to if they are worried are also important.</td>
<td>At this age children are interested in knowing about love and the different kinds of families, they will be curious about puberty and sexual feelings and changing body image. They will want more details about conception, how babies develop and are born and why families are important for having babies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 7–8</td>
<td>They will also be interested in knowing about how people can get diseases, (including HIV), from sex and how they can be prevented. They will also want to know who they can talk to if they want help or advice and information about growing up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At this age children are interested in the emotional and physical changes of growing up, similarities and differences between boys and girls, coping with strong emotions and how babies are made from eggs and sperm. How to look after our bodies and how to be safe and healthy are also important.
### Between ages 11 and 13

At this age most young people will be going through puberty and will be interested in hormones, how they will be affected by them, the menstrual cycle, wet dreams, erections, fertility, pregnancy – how it can be avoided, and safer sex. They also want to know if their physical development is ‘normal’.

Young teens also want to know about the difference between sexual attraction and love and what it means to be attracted/in love with someone of the same gender. Young people will be asking questions about relationships, when is the right time to have sex, how to avoid pressure and where they can get more information if they need it, including the best websites.

### Between the ages 14–16

At this age young people want to know about different types of relationships. They may want to know about how to cope with strong feelings and how to cope with the pressures to have sex. They will be interested to know what they should expect of a partner and how to talk to them. They will need more information on contraception, sexual health and how to access services and advice. They will start to ask questions about parenthood and may like to know how they can talk to their own parents or a trusted adult.

Secondary age pupils will also be interested in other influences on sexual decision making such as the law, different cultures and religious beliefs, pornography, the media and the effects of drugs and alcohol.

Most young people will not have sexual intercourse until they are at least 16 but statistics show that about a quarter of young people will have had sexual intercourse by the time they are 16.

### Ages 16-19 and beyond

At this age young people are at the legal age of consent and many, but not all, will be in intimate relationships and will be interested to know about the challenges of long-term commitments and the qualities needed for successful loving relationships. They also need information about contraception and sexual health and how to access services.
3. What does evidence tell us about relationships and sex education?

International evidence shows that young people who have a broad programme of relationships and sex education that starts early in schooling are more likely to delay having sex until they are older, use contraception and have fewer sexual partners. Local authorities in England with good quality relationships and sex education as a contributing factor have been successful in reducing rates of under-18 conceptions.

**MYTH** There is no evidence that relationships and sex education works.

**REALITY** This is FALSE.

There is good international evidence that relationships and sex education, particularly when linked to contraceptive services, can have a positive impact on young people's knowledge and attitudes, delay sexual activity and/or reduce pregnancy rates (Kirby 2007 and Santelli 2007).

**MYTH** Relationships and sex education encourages early sexual experimentation.

**REALITY** This is FALSE.

There is no evidence to support the view that increased provision of relationships and sex education reduces the age of onset of sexual activity or increases the frequency of sex or the number of sexual partners (Kirby 2008). In fact, the evidence suggests that the opposite is true.

**MYTH** Relationships and sex education will make children lose their innocence; they don’t need this kind of information.

**REALITY** This is FALSE.

Children need good quality age appropriate relationships and sex education, not only to answer their questions, but also to provide balance to the range of often misleading and inappropriate messages about relationships and sex in the media and other sources. Good quality relationships and sex education provides children with factually correct information and helps them to challenge misinformation. Quality relationships and sex education is protective, especially to help younger children be safe.
MYTH The best sex education is telling young people not to have sex (to abstain). Teaching them about contraception will just encourage them to have sex.

REALITY This is FALSE.

All parents and professionals want young people to wait until they are ready to have sex. This message forms the basis of all good quality comprehensive relationships and sex education programmes. There is good evidence to show that just telling young people not to have sex, without providing them with any information about contraception is not effective in changing behaviour in the long term. Also, teaching young people about contraception does not contradict messages about delaying first sex (Kirby 2008).

MYTH Teaching relationships and sex education is a problem for faith schools

REALITY This is FALSE.

There are lots of examples of faith-based schools teaching high-quality relationships and sex education. The core values of love, respect and care promoted through the subject are often strikingly similar to the values and ethos of a school community. Having an open dialogue with parents and governors is key as many examples show: http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/practice/faith-values-sre.aspx
4. What is currently being taught and what do young people say about it?

The quality and quantity of relationships and sex education taught in schools varies very widely. The best schools have a broad programme with some learning every year and well trained and supported teachers. But some schools teach only the biological basics, for example some schools timetable one lesson on puberty which is in the summer term of the last year of primary school. Some children start puberty aged 8, so this is too late. And one in ten young people said they didn’t learn about the biological aspects of puberty in school (SEF, 2008).

Ofsted are aware of the problem and have noticed that relationships and sex education is often the weakest area of PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) education in schools. Around 1 in 4 young people said they did not get any relationships and sex education at school (Brook, 2011) and a third of young people said their relationships and sex education is ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ in a Sex Education Forum survey (2008).

Involving children and young people in reviewing relationships and sex education will help to make sure provision meets their needs. The Sex Education Forum have produced two toolkits with activities that can be used in primary and secondary schools to ask pupils for their views. Resources to support involving young people available from http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/schools/young-people-involved-in-design-and-development.aspx

“She managed to cram all the stuff we needed to know … in year 10, which was way too late, should be in year 7 and 6.”

“The teachers also were embarrassed… They could have done with some sort of training so they knew how to tackle and explain things better.”

Quotes from young people taken from surveys by the Sex Education Forum (2008) and UK Youth Parliament (2007).
5. Support from parents and carers

The majority of parents and carers are very supportive of relationships and sex education. In a Mumsnet survey 98% of parents said that they are happy for their children to learn about sex and relationships at school (2011).

All schools should consult parents and carers about what they teach and when. In some cases parents and carers have assumed that the school is teaching their child about puberty, for example, but have been disappointed to discover how little has actually been taught and how late.

Many parents and carers want to take more of a role in talking to their children about growing up, sex and relationships at home. However embarrassment, lack of knowledge, and a poor experience of their own relationships and sex education get in the way.

Parents and carers welcome support from schools in overcoming these barriers. The Sex Education Forum has produced a guide which explains how this can be done: ‘Let’s work together; a practical guide for schools to involve parents and carers in sex and relationships education’ (2013). Available at: http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/schools/partnership-with-parents-and-carers.aspx
6. What are the statutory requirements?

All schools must teach a broad and balanced curriculum. When judging a school’s effectiveness Ofsted assess how well a school promotes pupils’ spiritual, social, cultural and moral development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life. Relationships, human sexuality and growing up are fundamental to every child and have profound links with spiritual, social, cultural and moral development, so there is a clear remit for this to be covered in the curriculum.

Since January 2012 Ofsted have started looking at ‘Behaviour and Safety’ in their inspection. They want to know how well pupils are able to understand and respond to risk and this includes risk in relationships including sexual relationships. Schools also have a legal duty to promote the well-being of pupils (Children’s Act 2004)

The Equality Act (2010) stipulates that relationships and sex education issues are taught in a way that does not subject pupils to discrimination.

It is compulsory for all maintained schools to teach the biological aspects of sex education covered in National Curriculum Science. This includes basic information about human growth and reproduction.

Primary and secondary (maintained) schools are required to have a policy on sex education. All schools including academies and free schools must give due regard to the government sex and relationship education guidance (2000).

Key points from the guidance include that:

- Pupils should learn the significance of marriage and stable relationships as key building blocks of community and society
- All children, including those who develop earlier than the average, need to know about puberty before they experience the onset of physical changes
- Secondary schools should teach about relationships, love and care and the responsibilities of parenthood as well as sex; provide young people with information about different types of contraception, safe sex and how they can access local sources of further advice and treatment; and ensure young people understand how the law applies to sexual relationships.

For more about the statutory requirements download the Sex Education Forum briefing ‘The current status of SRE’
http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/policy-campaigns.aspx
7. What is good quality relationships and sex education?

The Sex Education Forum has established a set of values and principles for relationships and sex education. Checking that these are in place helps ensure that what is taught is factually accurate, safe for teachers and pupils and part of a bigger conversation with families and the school community.

Good quality relationships and sex education should:

- Be accurate and factual, covering a comprehensive range of information about sex, relationships, the law and sexual health, in order to make informed choices. In schools this should be part of compulsory curriculum provision;
- Be positively inclusive in terms of gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, culture, age, religion or belief or other life experience particularly HIV status and pregnancy;
- Include the development of skills to support healthy and safe relationships and ensure good communication about these issues;
- Promote a critical awareness of the different attitudes and views on sex and relationships within society such as peer norms and those portrayed in the media;
- Provide opportunities for reflection in order to nurture personal values based on mutual respect and care;
- Be part of lifelong learning, starting early in childhood and continuing throughout life. It should reflect the age and level of the learner;
- Ensure children and young people are clearly informed of their rights such as how they can access confidential advice and health services within the boundaries of safeguarding;
- Be relevant and meet the needs of children and young people, and actively involve them as participants, advocates and evaluators in developing good quality provision;
- Be delivered by competent and confident educators;
- Be provided within a learning environment which is safe for the children, young people and adults involved and based on the principle that prejudice, discrimination and bullying are harmful and unacceptable.

You can also refer to these values and principles published on the Sex Education Forum Website: www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/about-us/values-principles.aspx

The RSE hub has developed a relationships and sex education self review framework that supports schools to assess their provision against a set of established criteria. For more information visit the RSE Hub website at www.rsehub.org.uk
Case Study

Good quality relationships and sex education in a Catholic primary school

Christ the King is a Catholic primary school in an area of high deprivation in Bristol. Five years ago the head teacher realised that the one-off talk on puberty given to pupils in the final year of school fell short of meeting pupil needs.

The head teacher was supported by a local authority relationships and sex education advisor with information about the evidence in support of relationships and sex education and how to go about introducing a comprehensive programme running from Reception to Year 6.

The head teacher communicated her clear vision about the programme to staff, parents and governors, with support from the local Parish Priest. Staff received one-to-one support from an experienced staff member to boost their confidence in teaching the new materials and there were several discussion opportunities with parents in groups and individually.

Six years later the new relationships and sex education programme has enhanced the school ethos of respectful behaviour and compassion for others. By the time pupils leave the school they are prepared for growing up, able to talk accurately and sensibly about relationships and sex, know their rights to say “no” to unwanted sexual contact and how to get help if they need it.
8. How does relationships and sex education impact on other local priorities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressing child poverty and under 18 conceptions</th>
<th>Safeguarding and well-being of children and young people</th>
<th>Sexual health and HIV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teenage pregnancy rates are at the lowest level since 1969 but the rates are highest in areas of deprivation. Approximately half of teenage conceptions end in abortion. Good relationships and sex education contributes to reducing under 18 conception rates and in turn helps end a cycle of teenage parenthood and poverty.</td>
<td>Relationships and sex education gives children the words to talk about their bodies and knowledge about what is private and when not to keep a secret. This means children know how and when to ask for help. Learning about what is acceptable and unacceptable in relationships also helps protect against sexual exploitation. Thus relationships and sex education provides an essential foundation for schools and local authorities to fulfill their safeguarding duties.</td>
<td>Prevention is priority in the government sexual health strategy, and this starts with good quality information and education. Teaching a little often is more effective than a 'big talk' and helps build the language and skills that children need to be confident about how their bodies work and able to seek help and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people with low attainment and negative experiences of school are at high risk of becoming teenage parents. Local authorities have a duty to support implementation of raising the participation age to 18 by 2015. Providing intensive relationships and sex education in smaller groups for young people at risk will have benefits both for their engagement in education and health outcomes. There are similar benefits from schools (especially primary) working in partnership with parents to help fulfill their parental role in relationships and sex education.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equalities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships and sex education has role to play in reducing the likelihood of sexist, sexual, homophobic and transphobic bullying occurring in part through addressing some of the underlying attitudes and values that underpin it. A broad curriculum will cover issues relating to bullying, gender equality and sexual orientation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13
9. What can lead members and other councillors do?

- Understand the contribution that high quality relationships and sex education can make to improving the lives of children and young people and meeting local public health outcomes

- Invest strategically within the local authority to ensure schools have the support they need and teachers get adequate training

- Be a champion for relationships and sex education by pro-actively engaging with media and challenging negative stereotypes and misinformation

- Find a local school with excellent relationships and sex education. Ask to visit or talk to the school to get a full understanding and share the example with others

High level council endorsement for age-appropriate relationships and sex education in Croydon primary schools

An overview and scrutiny review in Croydon looking at under-18 conception rates highlighted relationships and sex education as an area needing more investment. A new scheme of work for relationships and sex education in primary schools was then developed by Healthy Schools Croydon – within the Children and Young People’s Learning directorate.

Previously many primary schools began teaching relationships and sex education in Year 6. But the new scheme of work shows schools how learning about topics such as ‘why my family is special’, ‘what friendships are’ and ‘how my body is similar and different to others’ can be done in an age-appropriate way from Year 1 upwards.

The scheme was launched with high level strategic support; the chief executives of the council and Primary Care Trust and the Executive Director of the Children and Young People’s Learning directorate co-signed a letter sent to all primary schools endorsing the resource and encouraging them to use it. The scheme was also endorsed by the local primary head teacher’s association.

At least two-thirds of primary schools in Croydon are now using the scheme. Several head teachers have provided feedback that they gained confidence to adopt the scheme of work because they knew other schools in the area were doing so.
Questions you can ask to understand what is happening in your area

What support is provided by the local authority and local voluntary and commercial sectors to support the provision of relationships and sex education?

Is a ‘continuing professional development’ (CPD) training programme available for teachers and other professionals involved in relationships and sex education?

Is governor training on relationships and sex education available?

Has there been a relationships and sex education scrutiny review in your area? If so, what were the outcomes and recommendations, if not is there a case for one?

Is there provision for supporting parents with relationships and sex education, for example in local parenting strategies?

Are children and young people consulted and involved? How well do they rate their relationships and sex education?

Is relationships and sex education and young people’s sexual health included in communication strategies?

Has relationships and sex education been factored into the joint strategic needs assessment (JSNA)?

Your role in communications and public relations (PR)

You have a vital role in communications and PR. Some schools fail to improve their relationships and sex education because of fears about parental concern. The majority of parents support school relationships and sex education but some have misunderstandings about what relationships and sex education really involves. You can help dispel uncertainty through your confidence in speaking to other councillors, senior council officials and the local press, and endorsing evidence-based local initiatives to improve relationships and sex education.

Your role as a ‘Champion in relationships and sex education’

As a lead member or a councillor responsible for children’s services you have a vital role in championing the cause for quality relationships and sex education in schools and across the council. Visit or talk to the head teacher and PSHE or Healthy Schools Coordinators in schools delivering good quality relationships and sex education. Share the vision of what good relationships and sex education looks like. Communicating positive messages and promoting best practice with fellow members and governing bodies is an important part of your position.
10. How can overview and scrutiny reviews lever improvements in relationships and sex education?

Overview and scrutiny reviews present an excellent opportunity to find out about the quality of existing relationships and sex education provision, identify local barriers, engage with a wide range of local stakeholders and build support within a council. Regular meetings between scrutiny teams and lead members provide an opportunity to link relationships and sex education with other issues concerning children, young people, families, health and education.

Bristol investigates relationships and sex education through Overview and Scrutiny Review

Under-18 conception is a complex issue and in Bristol rates have not reduced as much as councillors hoped. There had been good investment in support for teenage parents and making sexual health services accessible for all young people across the city. But the provision of relationships and sex education was an area that many felt remained patchy so when the opportunity came up to carry out an overview and scrutiny review of under-18 conception (2011) the chosen focus was on education.

During an intensive day of investigation a team of six councillors heard from young people about the variable quality of relationships and sex education in Bristol schools, were given evidence that the majority of Bristol parents support relationships and sex education and explored the challenges and way forward with local authority relationships and sex education specialists and voluntary sector providers.

The scrutiny day led to a real shift in confidence, with councillors clear that every child should be entitled to receive good quality relationships and sex education and convinced of the need to bring schools on board to achieve this. The team of councillors involved in the scrutiny review led the full council in a debate about the recommendations.

These were duly endorsed by the full council and have been passed to the appropriate cabinet member for action.
11. More information and support

What is the RSE Hub?

The RSE Hub for the South West is a network of statutory and non statutory sector specialists whose aim is to improve the quality and consistency of and access to relationships and sex education.

We promote quality, well taught relationships and sex education as a vital link in improving health outcomes for children and young people.

The RSE Hub website provides reliable signposting to local and national resources, alongside up to date guidance and sources for support. The RSE hub also provides tailored support and services to educators and commissioners on all aspects of relationships and sex education.

For more information please visit: www.rsehub.org.uk

What is the Sex Education Forum?

The Sex Education Forum, hosted by the National Children’s Bureau, is the national authority on sex and relationships education (SRE) in England. It is a unique collaboration of over 90 member organisations and hundreds of practitioners with representatives from health, education, faith, disability and children’s organisations. The Sex Education Forum produce teaching resources and practical information about SRE for schools.

For more information visit: www.sexeducationforum.org.uk
References and useful resources


Local Government Association (dedicated health web pages) http://tinyurl.com/d5d62bt


Sex Education Forum (2008) Key findings; Young people’s survey on sex and relationships education http://tinyurl.com/c7c493w

Sex Education Forum (2013) Let’s work together; a practical guide for schools to involve parents and carers in sex and relationships education, NCB http://tinyurl.com/bte59fs


Briefing produced by Sex Education Forum and RSE Hub and endorsed by the Local Government Association (April 2013).