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Relationships and Sexuality Education Pilot:
Final Report for the Welsh Government

May 2022



Wavehill: social and economic research

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May 2022

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Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings from the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Pilot. The report is aimed at practitioners engaged in the design and delivery of RSE within their schools and settings. It contains learning, reflections and suggestions for schools and settings across Wales in helping them to think about how they could approach RSE.

Over the course of the 2021–22 academic year, practitioners from 15 schools kindly undertook a range of activities in planning and designing the new RSE curriculum within their school or setting. Here we present a brief summary of the findings. A more detailed outline of the experiences of schools, including learning and suggestions for other schools and settings, can be found in the subsequent chapters.

Overall Experiences of the Pilot

Over the course of the Pilot, many schools came to view their engagement with the new RSE curriculum as a journey. As schools explored RSE, there is strong evidence that a range of factors, to varying degrees, played a role in shaping engagement. These included, amongst others, individual factors such as the knowledge, experience and confidence of RSE leads, as well as broader school factors such as cultures of learning and support.

Suggestions:

To consider the range of individual, institutional and cultural factors that can influence engagement with RSE and the curriculum more broadly within a school or setting. This could be used to identify areas of strength and potential areas for improvement, particularly in addressing any potential barriers to effective engagement with RSE.

To entrust RSE planning and design with more experienced staff, including those who may have taught aspects of RSE previously. If this is not possible, to ensure that less experienced staff are given closer support, including more extensive advice, guidance and training.

To create, sustain and facilitate opportunities for practitioners to convene, including within and across schools and settings, in order to discuss and share learning in relation to RSE.

To consider engagement with RSE within a broader exploration of the Curriculum for Wales for many practitioners. This includes supporting them in building knowledge and skills in relation not only to RSE but also to the guiding principles of and the approach to the curriculum more broadly.

To focus training and support towards ensuring that colleagues are confident in their understanding of developmentally appropriate provision. This includes practical strategies for establishing where learners are at, and on how to navigate conversations on sensitive topics.

Guidance and Code

Participating schools were asked how they use guidance to inform teaching and learning. Two distinct themes emerged, including drawing on guidance to inform planning and preparation, and as a practical resource for teaching and learning.

On the whole, the draft Guidance was felt to be accessible and helpful in understanding the substantive themes and topics covered within RSE. This was especially apparent with respect to the tone and language of the Guidance, and the length (which made it easy to engage). There were areas of the draft Guidance that schools felt could be strengthened. Many expressed that more detailed guidance could be valuable in helping practitioners to visualise RSE in practice. This included providing clearer definitions of key concepts and ideas within RSE, as well as further resources and guidance on how the new RSE curriculum could be operationalised.

There was variation in the views and perspectives of participating schools with respect to the draft Code. Some felt, for example, that the breakdown of developmentally appropriate provision was valuable and informative. Others felt that more detail could be valuable, including in providing further information to establish the precise parameters of what constitutes developmentally appropriate provision.

Progress over the Course of the Pilot

There was considerable diversity in the nature and extent of the progress that participating schools had been able to make in planning and preparing for an RSE curriculum. Participating schools had broadly been able to make progress along a continuum, from sense making through to actively planning RSE within and across the curriculum.

In terms of sense making, all participating schools were able to make significant progress. This included in building knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to RSE. Where schools had made significant progress regarding planning and preparation, this included completing a range of practical steps. These included, for example, engaging learners and colleagues to understand their views towards RSE. Some schools reported that they had been able to consider how discreet elements of RSE could be adapted to or introduced into teaching and learning that reflected the new curriculum. A few schools had been able to go further to consider how RSE could be embedded more routinely within cross-curricular learning.

Suggestion:

To consider developing small teams to lead RSE, especially within primary schools. The team could include members with a mix of knowledge and experience. This may serve to help practitioners in building knowledge and confidence, as well as in reducing the scale of the task for any one individual.

Ways of Working

RSE was in most cases led by an individual member of staff. There was considerable variation in the seniority and experience of RSE leads, from newly qualified teachers through to senior leaders. In secondary schools, RSE leads were more likely to be subject specialists.

A key approach to planning and preparation that was raised by most schools included a review of the new RSE curriculum and considering how it fits with existing provision. Engaging learners, colleagues, governors and parents/carers in conversation, including in understanding their views and perspectives, was also drawn upon by many schools in support of planning and preparation.

Suggestions:

To draw on approaches such as curriculum audits or mapping and gapping early in the process of engagement with RSE. This can be valuable in building knowledge and confidence, as well as in prioritising areas of focus in responding to the new curriculum.

Where possible, to draw on learner voice early in the process of planning the new curriculum. This can be useful for curriculum design, as well as in communicating with colleagues, governors and parents/carers about the approach to RSE adopted within the school or setting.

To reassure broader colleagues across a school or setting. This could include providing opportunities to discuss or share concerns, as well as conveying messages that seek to clarify the nature and extent of their role in designing and delivering RSE, especially in establishing links across the curriculum. What is more, it may be valuable to give all colleagues practical examples of the links or types of materials that could be explored with learners.

Parent and Carer Engagement

Many of the concerns expressed by schools centred in large part on the views and perspectives of parents and carers. These included the importance of ensuring that RSE was sensitive to their perspectives, values and beliefs. Where schools or settings were approached with concerns, these tended to be isolated and from a small number of parents or carers. This was sometimes simply to find out more information on the new curriculum and how the school would approach RSE.

Schools described undertaking or planning to undertake a range of activities in engaging and communicating with parents and carers. Some suggested that they had experienced barriers to engaging with parents and carers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those that did engage with parents and carers, this often focused on understanding the views and perspectives of a small group of parents or carers in supporting planning and curriculum design. This included bringing together parents and carers to discuss ideas, explore any concerns, and gather suggestions on how the curriculum could be strengthened, such as ensuring that provision was inclusive.

Conclusions

Overall, the Pilot provided a range of valuable insights into how schools approach RSE, as well as the practical enablers of and barriers to planning and preparation. The experiences of Pilot schools serve to highlight the importance of the knowledge, experience and confidence held by leads and broader colleagues in supporting their engagement with RSE. Allowing time and space for sense making, including in exploring the RSE Code and Statutory Guidance, may be valuable in supporting progress in embedding RSE within a school's curriculum.

The experience of participating schools suggests that there is a positive relationship between knowledge and confidence. As leads became more familiar with the new RSE curriculum, they tended to report fewer substantive concerns and that they were more content with how they could approach teaching and learning. The importance of and approaches to ensuring developmentally appropriate teaching and learning was a key consideration in building confidence.

The Pilot resulted in a range of positive outcomes, both for participating schools and in informing the development of guidance and support offered to schools across Wales. The views and perspectives of participating schools were fed into the strengthening of the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance. Moreover, participating schools had highlighted the positive impact of the Pilot in supporting their engagement with RSE.

Introduction

This report summarises the findings from the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Pilot. The report is aimed at practitioners engaged in the design and delivery of RSE within their schools and settings. It contains learning, reflections and suggestions for schools and settings across Wales in helping them to think about how they could approach RSE.

Over the course of the 2021–22 academic year, practitioners kindly undertook a range of activities in planning and designing the new RSE curriculum within their school or setting. The Pilot sought to generate learning and ideas that could be shared with other schools and settings. The research was commissioned by the Welsh Government and completed by Wavehill, an independent research organisation.

Background

Curriculum for Wales

In partnership with practitioners, the Welsh Government have developed a new Curriculum for Wales. The new curriculum seeks to transform teaching and learning in classrooms, and represents a shift from a relatively prescriptive culture surrounding the curriculum, towards a more developmental approach that positions teachers as agents of change and professional developers of the curriculum. It espouses more overtly student-centred practices than previously, based around the development of certain capabilities in young people. The new curriculum aims to support all children and young people in becoming:

- Ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- Enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- Ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

As part of the proposals, RSE plays an important role within the purpose-led curriculum, supporting all learners in progressing towards the four purposes.

Relationships and Sexuality Education

The new RSE curriculum seeks to create safe and empowering school communities in which learners can grow, learn, and develop positive healthy relationships for life. RSE includes, but is not limited to, learning about:

- All types of healthy relationships, such as familial, friendships, and, later on, intimate relationships;
- The changing functions of the human body and how they influence behaviour and relationships;
- Social and cultural influences on representations of the body and relationships;

- Supporting learners in staying safe both online and offline and understanding where to seek help when necessary.

The RSE curriculum was developed through a process of co-construction, in which practitioners across Wales were closely supported by educationalists, experts, and other representatives, including from faith groups. Together, they reflected on the purpose of RSE and how it could encompass the broader ethos and approach contained within the Curriculum for Wales.

A key principle informing RSE is the importance of providing developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. This means that schools and settings must take into account a range of factors, including a learner's age, knowledge and maturity and any additional learning needs, as well as anticipating their physiological and emotional development.

The RSE Code was developed in order to set out mandatory content at developmentally appropriate stages to support schools and settings and to reassure parents about what their children will be taught. The Statutory guidance provides further support to schools with their planning and delivery. The full RSE Code and Statutory Guidance can be found by [clicking here](#).

RSE Pilot

In order to explore RSE in practice and support the refinement of the RSE Code and Statutory Guidance, the Welsh Government invited schools within a single local authority to undertake a Pilot. The Pilot set out to explore the experiences and perceptions of practitioners as they navigated RSE and considered how it could be embedded within their school or setting.

The Pilot sought to engage a mix of schools, including in the type and communities that they serve. In total, 15 schools kindly took part in the Pilot. They included Welsh- and English-medium schools, as well as primary schools, secondary schools, a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), and schools of a religious character.

The Pilot had two interlinked objectives:

1. To understand the value and limitations of the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance from the perspective of participating schools. This was in order to feed back early findings into the refinement and improvement of the final RSE Code and Statutory Guidance.
2. To draw out key lessons from the experiences of participating schools as they explored RSE, including any implications for planning, teaching and learning. This is in order to provide other schools across Wales with a practical resource with which to help them to build on this learning.

Each school was allocated £3,000 to support the release of the lead RSE practitioner to participate in the Pilot and test the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance. They were invited to review the documents and feed back their views, as well as to consider any broader implications such as for community engagement.

Participating schools were invited to share their views and experiences within a research project that surrounded the Pilot. Participating schools kindly attended three semi-structured interviews over the course of the Pilot. They were designed to understand the value of the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance in informing curriculum design, and in capturing learning from any planning and preparation that they had undertaken over the course of the Pilot. These were completed between July 2021 and February 2022 and are the focus of this report.

Approach

In addressing the aims of the Pilot, a qualitative research design was employed in order to gather the experiences and perspectives of participating schools. This included undertaking in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participating schools over three time points during the course of the 2021–22 academic year. All interviews were conducted online.

In the opening interview in September 2021, practitioners were asked for their views towards the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance. What is more, they were asked to share their broader thoughts and concerns regarding RSE, as well as how they would approach planning and preparation within the Pilot.

Follow-up interviews were conducted in December 2021 and February 2022. These sought to explore the progress that schools had made regarding planning and preparation, as well as highlighting what had worked well and any barriers or challenges that they had experienced in working towards RSE. The interviews also explored how schools had approached or were planning to approach engagement, including with learners, their parents/carers, governors, and the broader community.

All schools completed at least one follow-up interview. Despite best efforts to be flexible and support engagement with the Pilot, not all schools were able to attend every follow-up interview. This was due to a range of issues, including staff absences and changes, as well as the disruption that some schools experienced on a day-to-day basis due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysis and Interpretation

In order to support analysis and interpretation, transcripts of each interview were drawn up. These were then analysed using thematic analysis, which aimed to identify the main ideas and perspectives offered within conversations with practitioners. This was used to create a thematic framework that highlighted the range of views and perspectives across participating schools with regard to the issues under investigation, which was then used to explore trends across participating schools, including themes that were specific to certain groups of schools.

In supporting the interpretation of the findings, a workshop was convened with participating schools to explore the main takeaways from the research. Participating schools were invited to attend the session (n=8) and presented with the provisional findings. The views towards the emerging findings tended to confirm the analysis presented in this report.

In communicating the findings, the Pilot area and the participating schools have been anonymised in the interests of confidentiality.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations within this research that are important to note. Every effort was made to ensure that a diverse group of schools participated in the Pilot. The Pilot included a broad range of schools serving specific communities within a single local authority. Participating schools may have underlying characteristics, including in the communities that they serve, that may be very specific to the area or individual school. The organisation of the Pilot also sought to be as close to the conditions that other schools would experience when engaging with RSE. Participating schools did, however, receive additional funding (£3,000) and support — including through discussions across in-depth interviews — to which other schools or settings may not have access. These factors may have influenced participating schools' response to RSE within the Pilot, at least in part.

The findings of the Pilot should therefore be viewed as giving an indication of the issues that all schools could experience in their engagement with RSE, rather than as a definitive account. What is more, the responses and approaches adopted or advocated by participating schools should be viewed as being illustrative. It is important to consider whether the ideas or suggestions offered across this report are suitable for specific schools or settings.

1 Overall Experiences of the Pilot

Here we offer some general reflections and learning generated by the Pilot. What is more, we explore messages from broader research that can support our understanding of the experiences of participating schools, including a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

The Importance of RSE within the New Curriculum

There was broad agreement amongst practitioners with regard to the overarching rationale behind RSE. This included the importance of instilling principles of respect and safety, as well as empowering learners to confidently navigate their social worlds. Many felt that the new curriculum reflected the broader ethos or values of their school, especially regarding the importance of respecting others and the focus on learner well-being. For some, RSE served to confirm what they had already been doing in supporting an inclusive learning environment:

A few years ago we had major issues with race and lots and lots of homophobic comments and things like that. So we felt it important to review and update our schemes of work. We had already done a lot prior to the new RSE curriculum, and felt that the approach reinforced what we had already done.

Practitioner, Primary School

There was also recognition from some practitioners that they needed their teaching to evolve in order to make it more relevant and up to date for learners. This included responding to the themes and issues that learners were exploring or encountering in their social worlds, both in their interactions with peers and online:

When we were young, you may see a little bit of domestic violence on TV on some [sort of soap]. But children these days can flick from channel to channel, video to video on YouTube. Their experience is completely different [...]. And unless we teach them how to interpret that world, it's not going to work and these kids aren't going to grow to be ambitious and capable learners. You want them to be healthy and confident individuals. That's why this is so important.

Practitioner, Primary School

There was also broad recognition of the renewed focus on learner well-being reflected in the RSE curriculum:

I think we were all really excited that it had such a focus [on learner well-being] and it was at the forefront, because for our young people they will be the main issues that would be preventing them from accessing mainstream school. So it's an important one for us.

Practitioner, PRU

Others discussed the value of the broader flexibility within the new RSE curriculum, including in empowering practitioners to better support learners and respond authentically within their own contexts and understanding. This was viewed by some as a positive development, giving practitioners further opportunities to respond to the needs of learners:

I've quite enjoyed really thinking about what each strand could include, because it's not prescriptive, which is a good thing. It is suggestive of the kinds of things we need to be discussing with the children. And I think what's really key for us as well is pupil voice.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Curriculum Design as a Journey

Over the course of the Pilot, many schools came to view their engagement with the new RSE curriculum as a journey. One practitioner eloquently likened it to the metamorphosis of a butterfly, from the egg to the caterpillar and then to the emergence of the adult from the chrysalis. From this perspective, curriculum planning and design is a process framed by engagement, learning, discussion and experimentation, which happens over time.

As practitioners explored RSE, they tended to grow in confidence. This often stemmed from developing a deeper understanding of RSE and how it could be effectively embedded in teaching and learning. Furthermore, there was recognition from some schools that curriculum design is itself a constant process, one that seeks to improve and refine teaching and learning:

[The RSE curriculum] shouldn't be in a stagnant position at the moment, because it's going to evolve and change over time, and ours has already changed dramatically [...]. We've been adapting to different approaches, and it will change again to accommodate more that we acquire and develop in terms of knowledge, skills, experiences and training [...]. You're always searching for improvements and to accommodate all learners.

Practitioner, Primary School

Broader Research and Curriculum Reform

There is broader research that can support our understanding of the experiences of participating schools. More broadly, the Curriculum for Wales represents a shift from a relatively prescriptive culture surrounding the curriculum towards a more developmental approach that positions practitioners as agents of change and professional developers of the curriculum.

Curriculum reforms aspire to support change in the classroom; however, they are not a precise policy lever. They operate in a complex, ever-shifting environment. Reforms such as the new RSE curriculum are never isolated, but rather embedded in existing practice, policy frameworks, and institutional structures. How curriculum reforms are embedded in educational settings may depend on a range of factors. These include but are not limited to:

- Individual-Level Characteristics:
 - a. Knowledge of the purpose and objectives of the reform.
 - b. Attitudes and perceptions held by individual practitioners.
 - c. Capabilities, knowledge and confidence of practitioners.
 - d. Behaviours of practitioners in the classroom.

- Institutional (school or setting) and Cultural Characteristics:
 - a. Resources including time, materials, and training and support.
 - b. Strategic and operational leadership.
 - c. Adaptive capacity of the school to implement change.
 - d. Cultures of learning and practice within individual schools and settings.
 - e. Broader circumstances in which the school finds itself, including the community that it serves.

Together, broader research suggests that these factors combine to influence individual and institutional responses to curriculum reforms such as the introduction of RSE.¹ There is strong evidence from the Pilot that these factors, to varying degrees, all played a role in shaping engagement with RSE.

The importance of cultures of learning, for example, was very much evident in practitioners' responses. Commonly referred to as communities of practice, cultures of learning can be defined, in part, as a process of social learning that occurs when practitioners collaborate over an extended period of time. This includes in sharing and transmitting ideas, values and practical strategies. Within the Pilot, many felt that collaboration and peer-to-peer learning were vital elements in helping practitioners to build confidence and understanding in relation to the new RSE curriculum.

Suggestion:

To consider the range of individual, institutional and cultural factors that can influence engagement with RSE and the curriculum more broadly within a school or setting. This could be used to identify areas of strength and potential areas for improvement, particularly in addressing any potential barriers to effective engagement with RSE. A possible approach is that of the whole-school approach and professional dialogue, in which colleagues convene within and across schools to explore enablers of and barriers to engagement.

¹ E.g. Harris and Graham (2019) 'Engaging with Curriculum Reform: Insights from English History Teachers' Willingness to Support Curriculum Change' in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*

Confidence

The confidence of RSE leads played an important role in shaping schools' response to the new RSE curriculum. When starting out, some practitioners were unsure and tentative. Leads who felt more tentative at the start of the Pilot tended to be new to RSE. These included recently qualified practitioners, or those who had not previously taught topics covered within RSE. These schools, for example, were more likely to express:

- The importance of more detailed guidance and support in helping them to design and deliver RSE in their schools or settings.
- Concerns surrounding firmly establishing what is developmentally appropriate and what is not.

Conversely, those leads who were more experienced tended to feel more confident about the new RSE curriculum. What is more, those schools that expressed drawing on more collaborative approaches tended to also report greater levels of confidence in and engagement with RSE. This included bringing colleagues together with senior leaders at the very start of the process in exploring RSE and how it could be embedded in teaching and learning. This suggested that support networks and peer discussion may have been important in providing reassurance and building confidence amongst practitioners.

Suggestion:

To entrust RSE planning and design with more experienced staff, including those who may have taught aspects of RSE previously. If this is not possible, to ensure that less experienced staff are given closer support, including more extensive advice, guidance and training. This suggestion reflects the principle of the whole-school approach outlined in the [Statutory Guidance](#). This emphasises the important role of leadership in guiding the vision for RSE, and in supporting RSE leads and other colleagues in engaging with the new curriculum and accessing professional learning.

In building confidence in relation to RSE, some described a light bulb moment in engaging with RSE. This often centred on a formative event such as a reassuring conversation with a colleague, or attending training that had been illuminating:

Since we last spoke, I actually went on an RSE course. It was an online course over two consecutive days and it was really helpful. It was very interactive and it showed lots of resources that we could use in school — lots of ways to use them [...]. [The training] raised some possible ideas for the future, and then we did a mapping and gap exercise. I used some of the activities from the course that I had seen, and so that worked out well [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Across conversations with practitioners, several themes emerged which served to reassure and build confidence in relation to RSE. These included the realisation that the scale of change was not as significant as initially assumed. From these perspectives, initial perceptions of RSE suggested that it represented a significant departure from what had been previously. Once these practitioners had become more familiar, they tended to reflect that they felt as though they had already been covering much of the new curriculum. For some, it was reassuring to know that the scale of the task was perhaps not as significant as they had initially assumed.

There was also growing recognition amongst many practitioners that the RSE curriculum reflected the broader ethos and vision of their school, particularly in fostering supportive and respectful learning environments. This was also reassuring because it validated the approach that schools had already taken in supporting learners, particularly with regard to their broader well-being.

Another theme was the understanding that they were not alone in navigating the new RSE curriculum. This included conversations with practitioners in other schools that served to highlight that they were encountering similar questions and challenges, including in establishing what is developmentally appropriate for learners. Moreover, these conversations were invaluable in sharing learning and ideas, which practitioners said would be extremely helpful in visualising RSE in practice:

[After the training session] I was able to talk to a number of schools. I found it most beneficial just to speak to other people who are, first of all, in the same boat as me, and, you know, we explored it together.

Practitioner, Primary School

Suggestion:

To create, sustain and facilitate opportunities for practitioners to convene, including within and across schools and settings, in order to discuss and share learning in relation to RSE.

Knowledge and Experience

Closely linked to confidence, another key factor influencing schools' engagement was the underlying knowledge and experience of RSE leads and broader staff. More experienced practitioners and those who were more familiar with the topics and themes covered within RSE tended to report further or quicker progress in planning and preparation. This suggested that for less experienced practitioners, they may have lacked the foundational knowledge and experience required to fully engage with the new curriculum from the outset. This required them to spend time on establishing said foundation through reading, training and discussion.

There was also an additional dimension to knowledge and experience. Not only were some practitioners exploring the new RSE curriculum, they were also making sense of the Curriculum for Wales more broadly. This included building familiarity with some of the guiding pedagogical principles underscoring the broader curriculum, and its language and structure.

With greater emphasis on practitioners as designers, not merely deliverers, of the curriculum within their school or setting, this also required some to exercise new skills or approaches with regard to thinking about teaching and learning. This suggested that engagement with RSE was also happening concurrently with examination and exploration of the broader curriculum, including in developing skills and understanding how to become effective curriculum designers.

Suggestion:

To consider engagement with RSE within a broader exploration of the Curriculum for Wales for many practitioners. This includes supporting them in building knowledge and skills in relation not only to RSE but also to the guiding principles of and the approach to the curriculum more broadly. This may help to reinforce the foundation on which practitioners can approach RSE.

Developmentally Appropriate Provision

A key area with which many schools were grappling was the importance of establishing developmentally appropriate provision. Some felt that the new RSE curriculum, with greater focus on subsidiarity in curriculum design, enabled practitioners to respond to issues or themes raised by learners. This was felt to be important in empowering practitioners to respond more effectively to the needs of learners:

We are now in a position that if they're developmentally ready, it also allows us to say: 'Right, well, okay.' If we are having questions about contraception, we can address them, not going into the full workings of them, but we can have that conversation. There's a little bit of freedom to go a little bit further, but if they're ready for it.

Practitioner, Primary School

For others, however, there were a range of challenges in determining and embedding developmentally appropriate provision, particularly for younger children. From these perspectives, there are a range of considerations, including how to determine whether a group is ready to explore a particular theme or topic. Furthermore, there were considerations surrounding how to then approach a topic and how to handle any subsequent discussion or questions from learners.

Some found that determining whether a year group was developmentally ready was challenging, given that a single cohort could include a diverse range of learners at different stages of development. Sensitively responding to such diversity was felt to be important, but some were unsure as to how this could be achieved in practice. From these perspectives, it was a delicate balancing act, considering the needs and expectations of those learners who were requesting or were ready to cover specific topics, as well as the needs and expectations of those learners who were perhaps not ready:

[The draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance do not] *actually go into sexual relationships [at the primary level] until later in Key Stage Two. Those [sorts] of questions might arise, however, and knowing how to answer [them] without going into too much detail and being mindful that some children and the class may need this information [are] difficult to balance, including in engaging in material that you know others wouldn't be developmentally ready [for] at all.*

Practitioner, Primary School

The importance of ensuring provision that was developmentally appropriate was a key thread underscoring many of the views and perspectives of practitioners with regard to the RSE curriculum. Alongside ensuring the well-being of learners, this was also from the perspective of balancing and respecting the views of parents and carers. Informing these perspectives was the sensitivity of the subject, and in building trust and engagement with colleagues and parents/carers. It was felt to be very important to get this balance right:

I think one of the barriers for us is what staff and parents might see as inappropriate. When you actually look at the [Brook Traffic Light](#) tool, it's not [...]. It should be more explicitly stated what [we should] be delivering to the students, because otherwise staff and families may feel that it might be a little bit inappropriate.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Building confidence in and knowledge of different approaches to ensuring that provision is developmentally appropriate was considered to be key, including through support, discussion and training. This was considered to be important in supporting conversations with learners:

I think having an overview of what you're delivering is enough, but also to really know your stuff as well. So if [learners are] asking you questions about pornography [in year six], how are we going to approach that? What is that going to look like? So, basically, we have arranged some staff training on how to broach sensitive subjects, how to have those conversations in a safe space with the children [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Suggestion:

To focus training and support towards ensuring that colleagues are confident in their understanding of developmentally appropriate provision. This includes practical strategies for establishing where learners are at, and on how to navigate conversations on sensitive topics.

Enablers of Engagement

For many practitioners in the Pilot, as they became more familiar with the new RSE curriculum, they became more confident. This suggests that there are positive relationships between confidence, knowledge and experience and practitioners' engagement with RSE. One participating school, for example, reported having been a pioneer school. They expressed confidence in their engagement with the new curriculum, stemming from the time that they had spent on exploring the new curriculum and building confidence, knowledge and experience.

This also highlights the importance of giving practitioners time and space with which to build knowledge and confidence, especially more junior colleagues or those new to RSE:

Time, resources and training, but it's confidence as well. I think it's [about the] kind of confidence and ensuring that there is someone that is wholly responsible that oversees things. You've got to have somebody that is that driving force.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Together, practitioners highlighted a diverse range of enabling factors that helped them to build knowledge and confidence in relation to RSE. These included:

- Time and space to explore and understand RSE and the new curriculum.
- Peer support, including from senior leaders, both within and across schools.
- Access to high-quality training and resources.

The Impact of COVID-19

A key barrier to engagement with the new RSE curriculum amongst schools was the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This included mitigating and addressing disruptions to teaching and learning experienced prior to the Pilot, as well as further disruption over the course of the Pilot between June 2021 and February 2022. Schools and settings experienced, for example, considerable staff absences over the course of the Pilot.

The disruption faced by schools impacted in a number of ways. It limited the time available to staff to engage in planning and preparation for the new curriculum. Furthermore, it limited the types and extent of activities that practitioners could undertake, particularly those that were felt to benefit from face-to-face interaction such as with parents and carers. Together, this served to limit the progress that many schools would like to have made in preparing for the new curriculum.

2 Guidance and Code

Early in the Pilot in September 2021, participating schools were invited for their views towards the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance. These insights were then used to inform the refinement of the documents.

2.1 How the RSE Code and Guidance Are Used

Participating schools were asked how they use guidance to inform teaching and learning. Two distinct themes emerged, including drawing on guidance to inform planning and preparation, and as a practical resource for teaching and learning. At a more strategic level, guidance provides an important resource for understanding the expectations placed on schools:

As with any kind [of] guidance materials around the curriculum, as the headteacher, I'd be reading them to see what I needed in terms of my leadership role. I approach guidance to understand what statutory requirements we would need to fulfil, and in thinking about [whom in the school] I needed to share this with. What do I need to be sharing with my governing body as well? [...] I did find it quite helpful to be honest. I quite like the fact that it's not really long, because sometimes guidance documents can be so long that you just end up getting lost in [them].

Practitioner, Primary School

Schools have also used the Guidance as a means of helping colleagues to develop a shared understanding of the new curriculum. This included sharing the Guidance and using it as a point of discussion. The precise ways in which colleagues convened to explore the new curriculum were many and varied, including through more formal arrangements, such as discussing the implications during inset days, as well as through more informal arrangements in which colleagues would convene to discuss the Guidance between themselves:

We would always share it with our colleagues and have an expectation that they are familiar with the Guidance. But there's a recognition that there's a lot to understand. If you look across the whole curriculum, there's a lot of guidance and a lot of areas, so not everybody is going to be the expert in that area. So then we look at making sure that we do have our experts and have a team that will take responsibility for that area of the curriculum.

Practitioner, PRU

Some spoke about the Guidance as being a live document, one that is continuously being referred to. From these perspectives, familiarity with the Guidance is built up over time amongst individual practitioners and as a group. Schools also looked to the Guidance as a practical resource with which to generate ideas to support teaching and learning. For many participating schools, this was where the draft Guidance could be strengthened. Some schools highlighted that the Guidance provided a high-level account of the breadth and content of RSE; however, they found it difficult to visualise what it would look like in practice. From this

perspective, greater insight and resources in relation to how to approach and deliver developmentally appropriate provision would be beneficial:

It's not that detailed. It didn't give me an idea of how we could use it to teach certain things. Maybe some more ideas would be helpful, especially in linking different subjects and areas [across the curriculum]. Now that would be quite helpful.

Practitioner, Primary School

Following these suggestions, information has been added to each Area of Learning's 'Design your curriculum' guidance on Hwb.

2.2 Views towards the Guidance

On the whole, the draft Guidance was felt to be accessible and helpful in understanding the substantive themes and topics covered within RSE. This was especially apparent with respect to the tone and language of the Guidance, and the length (which made it easy to engage). In terms of understanding the statutory requirements surrounding RSE, it was largely felt that the Guidance was clear and effective. Some expressed that it set out a clear rationale for the reforms, including with regard to ensuring the rights of the child.

Some schools went further, suggesting that the Guidance was effective in communicating the parameters and requirements of RSE. These views tended to be held by practitioners who either were more familiar with the new curriculum generally, had been teaching aspects of RSE for longer, or had reported receiving training on the new RSE curriculum:

I thought that it was quite clear on what we need to do.

Practitioner, Secondary School

There were areas of the draft Guidance that schools felt could be strengthened. Many expressed that more detailed guidance could be valuable in helping practitioners to visualise RSE in practice. This included providing clearer definitions of key concepts and ideas within RSE, as well as further resources and guidance on how the new RSE curriculum could be operationalised. From these perspectives, practitioners sometimes were struggling to see how elements of RSE could be effectively embedded in teaching and learning.

There were also requests for further, more specific detail on issues such as the safeguarding implications surrounding RSE, including in identifying and handling disclosures. These reflections and suggestions were raised by many schools, but especially by practitioners who were new to RSE or teaching more broadly. Others felt that more detail on RSE policies would be beneficial, specifically links to examples or templates that schools could use as a starting point.

2.3 Views towards the Code

There was variation in the views and perspectives of participating schools with respect to the draft Code. Some felt, for example, that the breakdown of developmentally appropriate provision was valuable and informative:

[The Code] was clear when broken down into three categories. [It] was helpful [to have the] ages of the children, and I don't think there was anything that we don't already do, including teaching the younger children to respect each other.

Practitioner, Primary School

Some schools welcomed the overall approach to the Code, which sought to move away from detailed syllabi and prescription. From these perspectives, learner-centred provision surrounding RSE was key, and the Code embodied this in the approach within the general framework of the Code:

In terms of the tables, they tell you what you need to know [...] what's relevant to your learners. Because I think if you were too prescriptive, you're just ending up giving people a scheme of work then, and that overlooks that this is something that needs to be developed within your school.

Practitioner, Secondary School

There were, however, requests from other schools with regard to a greater level of depth and detail within the Code. This stemmed from two distinct considerations. The first was concerned with distinguishing between developmentally appropriate provision within the age ranges identified within the draft Code. Some felt that the age ranges were quite broad and could encompass a diverse range of learner needs, perspectives and development. This was especially apparent amongst secondary schools, where it was felt that the range of learner development could be broad, including within and across year groups. From these perspectives, greater depth and detail within the Guidance could give readers clearer direction regarding the precise parameters of what constitutes developmentally appropriate provision:

I guess to be more sure about what age-appropriate provision might look like. I do feel greater detail there would be valuable.

Practitioner, Secondary School

The second theme centred on greater detail that would support schools in making links between the Code and teaching and learning. From these perspectives, this would provide ideas and approaches on how to engage learners in a developmentally appropriate way, and in identifying potential cross-curricular opportunities:

I've read through the Guidance back in the summer and again this afternoon now prior to talking to you. Certainly, it's useful to read through it and, being totally honest, the bit that I've found useful is the grids, which give you an idea of what you are expected to teach at what points. Maybe what would be useful is if there was more guidance again on that, the resources available that you can maybe just click [on a link to access].

Practitioner, Primary School

2.4 Impact of the Pilot

In September 2021, these findings from the Pilot were then fed back to the RSE Working Group that set out to refine the RSE Code and Statutory Guidance. The findings were considered alongside other feedback generated by the public consultation on RSE completed in July 2021, as well as qualitative research with representative groups (e.g. children and young people). This reinforced messages in relation to the importance of further information and resources that could help practitioners to visualise RSE in practice. The RSE Working Group then refined the Code and Guidance before they were published in January 2022.

3 Preparation and Planning

Over the course of the Pilot, practitioners were asked to share what steps they had undertaken in preparing for the new RSE curriculum.

3.1 Progress over the Course of the Pilot

There was considerable diversity in the nature and extent of the progress that participating schools had been able to make in planning and preparing for an RSE curriculum. Between September 2021 and February 2022, participating schools had broadly been able to make progress along a continuum, from sense making through to actively planning RSE within and across the curriculum.

Figure 3.1: Progress as a Continuum



Sense Making

In terms of sense making, all participating schools were able to make significant progress. Sense making is the process by which the practitioners gather and interpret information in order to help them to understand and respond to the RSE curriculum. This includes building knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to RSE.

Schools described a range of activities that supported sense making. All schools reported drawing on the RSE Code and Statutory Guidance as a starting point. This often took time, in which practitioners would read and reread the documents in order to understand the content and approach advocated within the new curriculum.

In supporting sense making, practitioners would often report reading the Code and Statutory Guidance alongside other information and materials. These included broader Curriculum for Wales framework guidance, and a range of other resources relevant to RSE. This enabled practitioners to explore the mechanics of the new Curriculum for Wales, as well as to visualise the new RSE curriculum in practice. Furthermore, practitioners would often complement individual exploration of the Guidance and resources with other activities, such as discussing aspects of the Guidance with colleagues, or accessing professional development opportunities.

Progress in relation to sense making was also shaped, in part, by broader activities that schools had undertaken in planning and preparing for the Curriculum for Wales more broadly. Some schools highlighted that they had engaged in activities in preparation for the new curriculum. These included, for example, restructuring teams within schools in working together towards a new curriculum, such as within Areas of Learning and Experience. Schools also highlighted broader activities which they had found to be useful, including engaging in

professional dialogue and accessing professional learning opportunities that explored the broader principles and pedagogical approaches advocated within the Curriculum for Wales framework guidance. This broader engagement was seen to be valuable in developing a more rounded understanding of the new curriculum, including how schools should approach RSE. This suggests that sense making, for some, included building knowledge and understanding of the Curriculum for Wales as a whole, and not merely for RSE itself.

Over the course of the Pilot, all schools reported that they had made significant progress in exploring and making sense of RSE and how it could be incorporated into a school's curriculum. These included those schools which were initially more tentative and reported greater concerns or challenges with respect to responding to RSE. Over time, as practitioners made sense of the RSE curriculum, they became more comfortable and confident in visualising how it could be embedded in practice. Together, the process of sense making was an important first step in laying the foundations on which to plan and prepare for RSE within a school or setting.

Sense making was informed, at least in part, by practitioners' own prior knowledge and experience, including of teaching topics included within RSE. Where RSE leads possessed greater knowledge and experience, they were more likely to report making quicker progress in understanding the breadth and content of the RSE Code and Statutory Guidance. Those who were more experienced also reported that they were able to move more quickly onto planning for RSE in practice.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, confidence also played a significant role in supporting transitions from sense making to planning and preparation. In some cases, RSE leads expressed that they wanted to ensure that they had a detailed understanding before taking certain steps. This was especially the case when bringing others into discussions on RSE, including colleagues, parents/carers, and governors. From these perspectives, RSE leads wished to ensure that they had a clear idea in their mind of what they were going to do before broadening the conversation. This was also driven by an awareness of some of the sensitivities surrounding RSE, including in ensuring that it was deemed to be appropriate by colleagues and parents/carers.

Planning for RSE in Practice

Where all schools had made significant strides regarding sense making, there was again considerable diversity in the nature and extent of progress towards planning. Upon conclusion of the Pilot, all schools had a clear sense of the practical steps that they would need to take in planning for RSE within their settings. These included those schools that had not made significant strides beyond sense making. Steps that these schools were planning to undertake beyond the Pilot included, for example, updating the school RSE policy and engaging colleagues and governors with regard to RSE.

Where schools had made significant progress in relation to planning and preparation, this included completing a range of practical steps. These included, for example, engaging learners and colleagues to understand their views towards RSE. Some schools reported that they had been able to consider how discreet elements of RSE could be adapted to or introduced into teaching and learning that reflected the new curriculum. A few schools had been able to go further to consider how RSE could be embedded more routinely within cross-curricular learning. These activities will be explored in more depth below.

Upon conclusion of the Pilot, those that were most advanced tended to be primary and secondary schools in which RSE was being led by an experienced practitioner. For most schools, progress made during the Pilot was also delayed to varying degrees by the disruption that they had experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2 Ways of Working

RSE was in most cases led by an individual member of staff. There was considerable variation in the seniority and experience of RSE leads, from newly qualified teachers to senior leaders. In secondary schools, RSE leads were more likely to be subject specialists. One primary school adopted a slightly different approach. This included giving responsibility over RSE to three staff in particular who explored the curriculum together, closely supported by their headteacher. Through interviews, they discussed how supportive the approach was, and were less likely to highlight challenges, barriers or concerns in engaging with the new curriculum.

Suggestion:

To consider developing small teams to lead RSE, especially within primary schools. The team could include members with a mix of knowledge and experience. This may serve to help practitioners in building knowledge and confidence, as well as in reducing the scale of the task for any one individual.

Participating schools also discussed modifying or establishing new structures and ways of working in preparation for RSE. These included structures that could support the design of the curriculum, and in teaching and learning. There was considerable variation in the precise approach utilised by different schools. Some secondary schools, for example, had reorganised teams away from traditional subject boundaries and towards a structure that reflected the AoLEs. This was felt to be helpful in exploring the links between different aspects of the new curriculum, including RSE. For smaller schools, some described establishing the foundations, including establishing forums or groups for discussion and collaboration:

We weren't sure if we were going to make a new or use one of our existing groups. So the deputy head suggested that we use the curriculum design group, as that was its purpose. And so she was going to meet with me. I'm a year two teacher, [while] she's a year six teacher. I thought it was good to have a balance. You know, I can't guess what the year six children are going to want to learn or what they're going to ask. And it would be quite good to have an insight from the other side of it.

Practitioner, Primary School

Some practitioners spoke about the importance of pivoting ways of working both individually and collectively. This included making curriculum design a more routine and more systematic activity across practitioners' engagement with teaching and learning.

Curriculum Audits

A key approach to planning and preparation that was raised by most schools included a review of the new RSE curriculum and considering how it fits with existing provision. Practitioners described undertaking curriculum audits or mapping and gapping exercises. These were mostly undertaken by RSE leads, but sometimes in small groups. The draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance were often the starting point, at which practitioners would reflect on the general approach to and mandatory elements within RSE and consider how they could fit within existing provision. Practitioners often described identifying gaps which helped to clarify which aspects of teaching and learning required further attention or strengthening:

It's beginning to really unpack what each strand is looking for. What can you include? There were things in there that we've never talked [about] before, things like the menopause.

Practitioner, Primary School

These types of exercises also served to reassure some practitioners, especially those who had felt tentative at the start of the Pilot. Mapping the new curriculum helped practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of the new curriculum. For some, mapping and gapping served to highlight the work that schools had already been doing with learners.

Suggestion:

To draw on approaches such as curriculum audits or mapping and gapping early in the process of engagement with RSE. This can be valuable in building knowledge and confidence, as well as in prioritising areas of focus in responding to the new curriculum.

Including Learners

Another key approach to planning and preparation included asking learners for their views. Practitioners who drew on learner voice described a range of techniques, including drawing on existing groups, as well as setting up both formal and informal discussions with learners. These often centred on discussing what learners wanted to explore in RSE:

Yeah, we have [spoken to learners]. We have set up language, literacy and communication groups. These include three learners from each year group, and we've explored all the different areas of learning (including RSE). And then we also have a school counsellor, so they could take ideas from their class and then come back and share [them] with us [...]. This has been really useful in thinking about what we need to cover.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Both primary and secondary schools consistently found that learners wanted to engage in topics in relation to RSE:

I was shocked when I've done student voice in how much they actually already know. And even their parents will probably be shocked by how much they actually know as well. I do think there is a huge amount to do in upskilling staff in terms of confidence and teaching, and then being able to answer some of the challenging questions that arise from the material.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Drawing on the voices of learners was valuable in a number of respects. Some felt that it was helpful in understanding whether learners were developmentally ready to explore certain topics. It was also valuable in understanding the needs and expectations of learners, which could inform the design of the curriculum in schools. Furthermore, some found it to be valuable in building the rationale behind and importance of engaging with RSE, both with colleagues and with parents/carers:

[We found that] a lot of the things that children would ask and wanted to know about they maybe wouldn't feel comfortable speaking about at home or they wouldn't have the opportunity to talk about at home. We can then feed back to parents to say this is what the children want to learn, as opposed to this is what we're going to teach them [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Suggestion:

Where possible, to draw on learner voice early in the process of planning the new curriculum. This can be useful for curriculum design, as well as in communicating with colleagues, governors and parents/carers about the approach to RSE adopted within the school or setting.

There are a range of tools, approaches and information on which schools could draw in supporting their engagement with learners. These include advice and guidance on effective pupil participation that are published by [Estyn](#). What is more, they include broader information available to schools and settings that could help them to understand issues affecting children and young people. This includes the [School Health Research Network](#), which produces a range of information, including individual school reports, aimed at improving the health and well-being of learners.

Including Colleagues

The importance of including colleagues from across schools was also felt to be important. Some felt that this was valuable, given the greater focus on promoting cross-curricular learning opportunities. Some had, however, experienced challenges in collaborating with colleagues. This was often due to the disruption that they faced at the time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Where schools or settings had been able to engage colleagues, practitioners reported using a range of practical approaches. Some distributed surveys, for example, in order to gauge colleagues' perceptions or concerns in relation to RSE. Other schools had apportioned part or all of an inset day to share information and learning on RSE and discuss possible implications with colleagues. Many practitioners described drawing on more informal discussions, wherein leads would answer questions or problem-solve with colleagues.

Some practitioners found themselves responding to the concerns of their colleagues. These tended to mirror broader concerns surrounding RSE, including the importance of ensuring developmentally appropriate provision and respecting the wishes and perspectives of parents and carers:

We've got really good staff, but, you know, even some of them [are] like, 'Oh, no, [I] don't have to teach that, do I?' Because they think that this is covered by one session with the nurse coming in. But that isn't really enough, you know, for the children [...]. So I just think the main thing really that I would suggest for another school is to make sure that all of the staff are on board.

Practitioner, Primary School

The concerns of broader staff may have been driven, at least in part, by the perception that practitioners across the school were being asked to deliver all aspects of RSE. In schools that had been able to explore cross-curricular learning in more detail, they tended not to report the concerns of broader staff. One primary school, for example, had been exploring with staff how the themes of respectful friendship and diversity in family structure and caregiving could be reflected in the books that were presented to learners. This may have helped to reassure staff in terms of the possible conversations and questions that these materials would raise.

The importance of broader staff confidence to engage with RSE was also raised as a consistent theme by practitioners. This suggests that the relationship between confidence, knowledge, and engagement with RSE extends beyond those responsible for leading RSE in schools or settings.

Suggestion:

To reassure broader colleagues across a school or setting. This could include providing opportunities to discuss or share concerns, as well as conveying messages that seek to clarify the nature and extent of their role in designing and delivering RSE, especially in establishing links across the curriculum. What is more, it may be valuable to give all colleagues practical examples of the links or types of materials that could be explored with learners.

Including Governors

Governors were consistently found to be supportive and helpful in responding to the new curriculum. Some schools, for example, had found that parent governors were a valuable sounding board in testing ideas and considering the possible implications for parents and carers. Other schools reported that they wanted to develop a more rounded and more developed picture before they presented their plans to governors.

Governors' contributions to the Pilot are explored in more detail in the chapter on [Parent and Community Engagement](#).

Supportive Leadership

In supporting engagement and planning, leadership and close support were consistent themes raised by practitioners — at times implicit in the responses. It was apparent that where senior leaders either were RSE leads or had evidently closely supported the planning process, these schools were more advanced in their thinking and in preparing for the new curriculum. This suggests that active and supportive leadership may be an important factor in fostering confidence and engagement in curriculum design and planning:

So for me, I would have described [participation in the Pilot] as landing on my lap. I was able to draw on a broader support network which was helpful.

Practitioner, Primary School

4 Whole-School Approach

The draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance include a range of key principles that should underscore provision in settings and schools. These outline effective practice surrounding RSE, including promoting cross-curricular learning opportunities to examine topics and themes, as well as the importance of a whole-school approach.

The whole-school approach seeks to support good emotional and mental well-being by promoting a positive cultural environment in schools, wherein children and young people form positive relationships with staff and other learners, and in which relationships are strengthened. Teaching and learning in RSE should be supported by a whole-school approach to RSE and this is critical in supporting learners' well-being.

This means effectively linking all aspects of a school, including the curriculum, policy, staff, school environment, and community, so as to support learners in their RSE. This should support the development of positive relationships, allowing learners and practitioners to thrive, reinforce a consistent positive ethos, and provide high-quality holistic support for practitioners and learners.

A whole-school approach should include consideration of leadership and policy with respect to RSE. This should include participation of the senior leadership team in developing the school's vision for RSE, as well as the designation of an RSE lead within the school. Moreover, this should consider how the curriculum and pedagogy support and inform the development of the wider approach. Professional learning is also key. The senior leadership team should ensure that all staff participate in professional learning. Schools should also consider how their culture and environment can support RSE.

The Whole-School Approach

As expressed in the Guidance, there was recognition of the importance of extending or developing a whole-school approach to RSE. There was broad support for the importance of a pluralistic orientation of RSE contained within the Code, and promoting aspects of a whole-school approach. Some schools also felt that they had already been engaged with these key principles.

Whilst there was extensive evidence with which to suggest that participating schools were engaging with and acting on some of the principles within the whole-school approach, this was often implicit or inferred in how practitioners discussed the activities and planning that they had undertaken. When asked specifically if they had considered how RSE could be included within a whole-school approach, some schools struggled to articulate how they had approached it. This suggests that some schools were still building their understanding of the new curriculum more broadly and RSE in particular. It was not that schools were not approaching RSE in a way that was consistent with or reflected the general ethos and principles of the whole-school approach; rather, it is that this may not have been conscious. It may therefore be valuable to consider how schools and practitioners are supported in

relation to the whole-school approach, including in raising awareness of the principles and practical strategies advocated within the new curriculum.

Broader Principles

Alongside the whole-school approach, the Guidance also includes broader principles that should guide schools' engagement with RSE. These set out, amongst other factors, the importance of RSE provision that is responsive to and respectful of the lived experiences of learners.

Both explicitly and implicitly, participating schools were broadly supportive of the principles outlined in the Guidance. Those who were most familiar with the Guidance often found the principles to be useful in reminding readers of the issues that they should be considering in planning. This included in engaging and supporting colleagues, approaching curriculum design and development, and teaching and learning:

[The principles] give you a sort of conceptual framework to guide how [you] should approach it. It's stuff I already know and in some senses already do, but it is a useful reminder. It is clearly laid out and reinforces the key points I should be thinking about.

Practitioner, Secondary School

5 Cross-Curricular Learning

Alongside a whole-school approach, the RSE curriculum also seeks to strengthen links across the curriculum. This is in recognition that RSE is a broad, interdisciplinary and complex area that includes biological, social, psychological, spiritual, ethical and cultural dimensions. The promotion of cross-curricular learning seeks to support learners in making connections between RSE and the wider curriculum. This includes in understanding the historical, cultural, geographical, physical, political, social and technological perspectives and influences on RSE issues.

Cross-Curricular Learning

Participating schools had made variable progress in thinking about cross-curricular learning and how best to approach curriculum planning. Some schools, for example, were still finding their feet and building foundational knowledge and confidence that would enable them to broaden discussions surrounding the promotion of cross-curricular learning. In some schools, this was also partly a consequence of the disruption to teaching and learning that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those that had explored how RSE could link to other aspects of the new curriculum described undertaking a range of activities. Some were still very much in the early stages of thinking it through in their minds. Others spoke about being in the early stages of discussion with colleagues with regard to how to make links across the curriculum:

So, yeah, we've tried to look at the different strands and how we could link them with some other activity. So we are looking at rights next month and thinking and talking about how the rights of the child and the different strands link that way, and then linking with other topics as well.

Practitioner, Primary School

Iteration and Reflection

For those that had been able to explore links in more detail, these schools often described a process of iteration and reflection. This included focusing on a specific RSE strand or topic and then exploring possible links across the curriculum. Some described, for example, simply exploring the books covered in literacy to see if they could include stories with a more diverse cast of characters or with narratives examining issues or themes relevant to RSE (such as being a supportive and understanding friend). For older children, some practitioners focused on more obvious links between RSE and other subjects, such as biology, to see if there were areas that could be strengthened:

We have just been looking at making things a bit tighter [...]. So, for example, you know, we cover the human body in science and what have you. So just extending that with age-appropriate intro into reproduction, things like that.

Practitioner, Primary School

In extending the process of iteration and reflection, some described a broad approach to curriculum design that included trialling elements or approaches to see if they worked:

We tend to be really reflective. We do like to trial things either with one class or a year group perhaps or just a couple of teachers on the team, and then really think about how that went and tweak it a little bit perhaps and then try it again [...].

Practitioner, Secondary School

Building a Shared Understanding

There were, however, some concerns surrounding the practical implementation of cross-curricular teaching and learning. These stemmed from the understanding that some colleagues may not have the confidence or skills with which to engage learners regarding potentially sensitive topics:

I think staff are quite wary of [cross-curricular teaching and learning]. I think they're quite nervous almost of having these conversations with students without any sort of formal training or discussion. It's about knowing where that boundary lies [between what is appropriate]. It's because it's such a sensitive thing.

Practitioner, Secondary School

From these perspectives, schools tended to highlight the importance of greater detail within the Guidance, including with regard to what constitutes developmentally appropriate provision. Moreover, they raised the importance of broader training and support in underpinning effective practice around cross-curricular teaching and learning.

Alongside RSE leads, there was also recognition from practitioners of the importance of building confidence, knowledge and experience amongst colleagues across a school or setting. From these perspectives, practitioners understood that a greater range of colleagues would be engaged in the delivery of RSE. Some felt that supporting colleagues was important, particularly those less familiar with the topics under discussion:

Most of the staff were thinking along the same lines as I was at the beginning. They were a bit cautious and a bit nervous of it, but hopefully after all the conversations they were feeling a little more positive about it. We're generally a good team and where some people were feeling a little-bit nervous or they lacked knowledge in certain areas, other people said 'Well, you can find it here' or 'I can help you'. So it was a bit of a collaboration.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Suggestion:

To consider extending support to broader colleagues to help them to engage with cross-curricular learning and RSE. This includes engaging in professional dialogue and offering development opportunities that build knowledge and confidence. The focus of this support could include developmentally appropriate provision, and the importance of principles such as inclusivity and diversity in provision.

6 Implications for Teaching and Learning

Participating schools also reflected on the implications of the new RSE curriculum for teaching and learning.

It Is Okay Not to Have All of the Answers

A recurring theme across some schools was the understanding that it is okay not to have all of the answers. This included in planning and designing the curriculum, but also in responding to potential questions from learners. It was clear that some had placed significant expectations and pressure on themselves to get it right. Those who had arrived at the understanding that, actually, if a learner does pose a difficult or sensitive question, it was okay to say ‘Can I come back to you on that?’ felt reassured:

And we can't guess what all pupils are going to ask, so we mentioned that it's okay to be baffled and also to let the pupils know 'I'm not sure [of] that answer right now' or 'I'll look into it and I'll let you know'. If it isn't appropriate to share in schools, then we need to tell them that [...]. But by saying we don't have all the answers, it will help [colleagues] by alleviating that pressure [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Ensuring a Consistent Approach

Others highlighted the importance of developing a consistent approach to discussing issues and topics within schools. This would support more consistent messaging and a more consistent approach with respect to RSE, as well as implicitly supporting a whole-school approach:

In our school, we do the pivotal approach. I know lots of schools do now. So we kind of have a script when we're coming up against tricky behaviour. Teachers always deal with things in a very similar way. So if we're dealing with RSE in a similar way as well, I think it will help to reassure pupils that the teachers are all on the same wavelength. Hopefully it makes them feel safe as well when they're discussing things like this.

Practitioner, Secondary School

7 Parent and Community Engagement

Participating schools were invited to share their views on engaging with parents/carers and the broader community in relation to RSE.

Recognition of the Importance of Engaging Parents and Carers

Some spoke about the importance of engaging parents and carers in relation to RSE. This included not only in ensuring that provision was sensitive to their views and perspectives, but also in supporting more open dialogue at home regarding some of the themes and topics covered within RSE:

I want to open up those conversations at home as well, so if you know that we will be covering something this term — we're going to be looking at puberty, for example — then those conversations can then happen at home. And I think sometimes parents are a bit concerned about how to broach those subjects. So it might be an easier way in for them as well, possibly?

Practitioner, Primary School

Concerns Surrounding the Views of Parents and Carers

Many of the concerns expressed by schools, however, centred largely on the views and perspectives of parents and carers. These included the importance of ensuring that provision was sensitive to their perspectives, values and beliefs. Schools often spoke about the importance of maintaining trust and positive relationships with parents and carers. Getting it right in engaging learners in relation to RSE was important, both in terms of maintaining that trust and in achieving buy-in from parents and carers:

We've got quite a good relationship with our parents and there's a lot of trust, which is really, really nice. But it's something that we've had to work on for a number of years. Very often, doing things [...] face to face and getting that personal relationship is really, really important. So we took the time to go through it, and parents responded really positively to that.

Practitioner, Secondary School

There were concerns, however, that perceptions of RSE amongst some parents and carers were negative, which could potentially serve to undermine trust:

Because of what happened in England and with regards to some of the social media and press information that came out around the proposed RSE curriculum at the time, I think staff were concerned about potentially having to deal with some contentious issues.

Practitioner, Secondary School

One school spoke about the value of independent provision with regard to topics such as sexual health and puberty in schools, as this created a clear distinction in the minds of parents. From these perspectives, external and trusted providers such as community nurses were valuable in creating separation in the delivery of RSE. They helped to build trust amongst parents and carers, including in communicating that the provision is developmentally appropriate. The importance of getting it right and maintaining trust with parents and carers informed many schools' reading of and engagement with the new RSE curriculum:

I think there are still concerns, and staff do come to me with those worries, but purely from a point of concern of parental backlash a lot of the time. We've done a lot in exploring [how to teach topics such as] consent and safe touch [...]. I know some parents have commented and written back in and want to know exactly what's going on and what's being proposed.

Practitioner, Primary School

There was also considerable variation in the extent to which different school communities were considering these issues. Whilst all schools raised these issues to a degree, those with more diverse school communities and those of a religious character tended to be more likely to highlight that the views and perspectives of parents and carers were at the forefront of their minds:

And so we haven't had any problems with parents or governors or anything like that. But, at the same time, we are aware of the cultural differences and things like that. So I think it's just making sure that we're teaching it correctly.

Practitioner, Primary School

Concerns from Parents and Carers

Where schools or settings were approached with concerns, these tended to be isolated and from a small number of parents or carers. These were sometimes simply to find out more information on the new curriculum and how the school would approach RSE:

We have had. I think one parent contacted us because she'd heard that this new Code and Guidance [were] coming into play and she just wanted to know more about [them] really. So it was from an information point [of] view more than anything else. She was in contact with one of our assistant heads and she was happy with the information that she had.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Where schools or settings received more substantive concerns from parents or carers, these tended to be isolated to one or two parents or carers. Furthermore, some highlighted that they understood that some concerns amongst parents and carers were driven in part by apparent misinformation or misunderstandings concerning the nature and intent of RSE. One school, for example, became aware of a parent or carer who had attended a rally and subsequently spread misinformation amongst other parents and carers. They were able to

dispel these fears through direct engagement and communication. Moreover, there was acknowledgement from some that schools were navigating RSE in the context of broader debate and discussion:

We understand that there may be possible objections from within faith groups. But there are also other outside groups that have nothing to do with the school and that would object [...]. They tend to think it's all pornography and paedophilia and things like that [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Engaging and Communicating with Parents and Carers

Schools described undertaking or planning to undertake a range of activities in engaging and communicating with parents and carers. Some suggested that they had experienced barriers to engaging with parents and carers due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had served to limit normal opportunities for dialogue, especially in more informal settings or at parents' evenings. Some felt that they wanted to further develop their plans before sharing with parents and carers:

I'm not sure we've had any concerns as yet. We haven't spoken to the parents as a whole yet, and that all of that is a plan in the summer term when the programme is perhaps more shaped, so we can really show parents what their children would be studying.

Practitioner, Primary School

Testing Perceptions

Of those that did engage parents and carers, this often focused on understanding the views and perspectives of a small group of parents or carers. This included bringing together parents and carers to discuss ideas, explore any concerns, and gather suggestions on how the curriculum could be strengthened, such as ensuring that provision was inclusive:

[We invited] parents of children with different backgrounds who were keen to discuss inclusivity. We discussed the new Code and we talked about our vision as a school. I had collected a list of books that would have been suitable for RSE and we went through them together. We shared some ideas and they made some suggestions on how they felt [...] their children [...] could be included. So we've decided now to form a little working party with parents [...]. They felt reassured once we've been through everything and showed them our aims for the future. It's really useful bringing them in because, obviously, they have thoughts that perhaps we wouldn't have thought of.

Practitioner, Primary School

Closely linked to including parents and carers in the design of the curriculum, practitioners also highlighted the value of testing perceptions with small groups. This was in order to ensure that the response of the school or setting to the new curriculum was sensitive to their wishes and concerns. This included undertaking a range of activities designed to understand whether the school or setting was on the right track:

It is crucial to get parents on board, and in engaging with the community and finding out what parent concerns may be and addressing those concerns. I've done that through questionnaires recently and the feedback is quite interesting [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Forums were also used to explore the new RSE curriculum with parents and carers. These were beneficial in gauging perceptions, exploring whether there were any substantive concerns, and communicating plans in relation to the new curriculum:

We also did a little bit of research with [parents and carers] as well through a forum. We had it in our mind's eye where we were going to go [regarding the new RSE curriculum]. We talked through things. We addressed any concerns and questions to the best of our abilities. And then they gave us some things to think about as well.

Practitioner, Primary School

Some schools also spoke about the value of drawing on parent governors through both formal governor meetings and informal discussions. What is more, they were to provide valuable insight into the potential views and concerns of parents and carers more broadly. This was valuable in terms of developing the narrative surrounding RSE that could be communicated to parents and carers and speak to any concerns that they may have.

Suggestion:

To engage a small group of parents and carers in order to understand their perspectives towards RSE. This could include engagement early within the planning process to ensure that the design and communication of the curriculum reflects and responds to the perspectives of parents and carers.

[Drawing on Key Individuals](#)

Some schools highlighted that they had engaged key individuals within the school community to support engagement and communication. This included engaging specific parents and carers who were able to support the school in exploring RSE and communicating with other parents and carers. Others discussed how helpful parent governors, or key community figures such as faith leaders, were in understanding and responding to potential concerns within the school and the broader community:

One of our other governors is high up in one of the local churches and they do loads and loads for the area and the community. When we weren't sure if we would come against any resistance there, [...] we explored it with [them] and there hasn't been any resistance. And other governors are being very, very supportive, including in exploring subjects such as gender and gender-based violence [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

When we [engaged] parents, we made sure that we had parent governors there as well, so the parent governors [...] could relate back what they've done in developing the [RSE] curriculum.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Suggestion:

To approach individuals within the school community, including active parents/carers, parent governors, and community members. They can be valuable in reflecting on the views of parents and carers, and in communicating with them with regard to RSE.

Communicating with Parents and Carers

In communicating with parents and carers, some schools found it to be valuable to share practical examples of the topics that learners would be exploring. This included sharing example materials or books, or the types of conversations that they would have with learners. This served to raise awareness and dispel some misconceptions, especially amongst parents and carers of younger learners:

[With parents and carers] I brought up [...] what constitutes a relationship and families. This included how we will discuss with pupils [that] not all families have 2.4 children. So we talked about what makes up a family, [such as how a child] might have a foster parent, [...] might have two mums, [...] might have two dads, [...] might have nan and granddad. I've talked about the implications in those conversations that you'd have with their children and how we would be using books across the school to really support learning. And [parents and carers] were completely happy with that [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Others spoke about the importance of communicating why it was important for learners to explore themes and issues within RSE. This included communicating the rationale behind RSE, including in empowering and protecting children and young people. Some also felt that it was important to say that the approach did not seek to promote or validate a particular viewpoint such as sexual promiscuity; rather, it sought to develop understanding and respect:

I think you totally need that dialogue for [parents and carers] to understand that [...] we're not going to be telling them about sex and that, you know, it's okay and go and try it. But we're going to be teaching them about the science behind that to help them to make more informed and confident choices.

Practitioner, Secondary School

Some also felt that it was also important to directly address any misconceptions regarding RSE:

Some have heard that it relates to children from three upwards to 16. They assume that it's somehow this kind of standardised thing that kids as young as three will be having inappropriate discussions. Key was showing parents and carers that this is not the case.

Practitioner, Primary School

In communicating with parents and carers, some schools that had engaged learners for their views found that conveying the results was reassuring and helped in building support:

When we talked with pupils, we were quite surprised communicating that back to either governors or parents in saying: 'Actually, [...] you know, these topics are things that pupils want to explore.' We have found that that's actually quite [a] powerful message to parents that this is being driven by pupils as well.

Practitioner, Primary School

Alongside the messages that resonated with parents and carers, practitioners also described the ways in which they communicated with parents and carers. These included a diverse range of approaches, including via distributing emails, more informal discussions, and parents' evenings. Some schools talked about creative ways of communicating with parents and carers. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, in one primary school, learners staged a play exploring some of the themes and issues covered in RSE at a parents' evening. This was helpful in reassuring parents and carers about how the school was approaching some of the themes covered in the classroom.

An aspect raised in the Pilot has been the importance of dialogue with parents and carers. This included giving opportunities for parents and carers to ask questions of practitioners and discuss any concerns. This is reflected in broader research on parent and carer engagement with regard to topics covered within RSE. Where parents and carers have a better understanding of the purpose and content of RSE, and where they are given opportunities to discuss their concerns, they tend to be more supportive.

Suggestion:

In engaging with parents and carers, to explore any thoughts and concerns with a small group before communicating more broadly. This can be valuable in understanding and effectively responding to any concerns. What is more, it may be valuable to provide practical examples of the materials and topics that learners will be covering in the classroom. If possible, it may also be important to provide parents and carers with opportunities to explore and ask questions about RSE with practitioners. This suggestion links closely with the principle of engaging with learners, parents/carers, and the wider community, which is included in the [RSE Statutory Guidance](#).

8 Resources and Support

Participating schools were also asked about the resources and support that practitioners found to be helpful in exploring RSE.

Peer-to-Peer Learning

A key theme was the opportunity to discuss and share learning with colleagues, including within and across schools. Practitioners described a range of formal and informal peer-to-peer learning opportunities. These included discussions during training events which offered opportunities for attendees to share their experiences and ideas with others. Peer-to-peer learning sometimes emerged from a more structured approach to planning alongside colleagues:

I think time was super-important. It was valuable that [my colleague] and I spent a lot of time not writing, just talking and discussing different things. And that was such an important part to have somebody else to bounce ideas off.

Practitioner, Primary School

Practitioners also described more informal conversations as being valuable, including the opportunity for practitioners to ask questions to or for advice from other, often more experienced, colleagues. Others spoke about reaching out to colleagues in other schools to discuss aspects of RSE, share ideas, or problem-solve.

Leads also spoke about the important role that they had in disseminating information and learning within their school or setting. This included answering questions from colleagues, and presenting outlines of the new curriculum during inset days or in other forums. Together, peer-to-peer learning represented an important aspect of the broader support and resources that practitioners accessed over the course of the Pilot.

Materials and Resources

Practitioners also spoke about the importance of practical materials and resources. Resources presented a valuable discussion point for practitioners, including as they were examining how to approach teaching and learning, and in answering any questions from learners. This included drawing not only on the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance as a point of discussion, but also on more practical resources such as storybooks that could be used in teaching and learning:

We've purchased a load of books, mainly as a conversation starter really [with staff]. This was just to generate conversation and questions that they want to ask. And so we went on to the [external organisation] website and they gave lots [of] suggestions on different books. And then we've tried to get [the external organisation] to do workshops with the staff and the children, and we just haven't had the time [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Beyond books, practitioners also described drawing on a diverse range of materials and resources, including those developed by external organisations. There was some disagreement as to the extent and usefulness of these resources. Some felt, for example, that it was difficult to find potentially relevant resources. This was especially the case in the provision of Welsh language resources. Others felt that there was almost too much, and that it was difficult to discern which to use in teaching and learning.

Professional Development Opportunities

Alongside materials, professional development was also a very important element for practitioners. Some highlighted that they felt it to be important to gauge confidence and knowledge across the school and see if they could be addressed by specific training provision or opportunities:

We started by sharing the [draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance] briefly with staff, and then [in] the next phase of meetings, we're going to explore [them] in more depth. We would then like to [undertake] a little consultation to see whether there are any elements that we think that children should be covering, and what our teachers may need in terms of extra training [...] to deliver.

Practitioner, Primary School

Others highlighted that they found existing professional development opportunities to be variable in terms of their quality and extent. Some found, for example, smaller, more intensive sessions to be more valuable than presentations that offered information.

External Support

Another category of support included drawing on the expertise of external organisations to support curriculum design and the delivery of teaching and learning. Some schools shared that they had invited outside speakers to explore some of the themes and topics covered in RSE with practitioners. This was found to be valuable in raising awareness of and building confidence with regard to certain topics. Others reflected that broader facilitation and support, including from the local authority, had been invaluable:

We've been lucky in [the local authority. They have] arranged all sorts of training for RSE and for RVE [religion, values and ethics] as well. This included staff training sessions after school on Tuesdays, and I think that that's really helpful because [...] not only does it give us some formal training, [...] it also allows us to discuss with other staff [...] what's going on, how people are moving forward, and that kind of thing. That's been [a] really positive thing that's happening [...].

Practitioner, Primary School

Others described drawing on outside agencies and organisations to deliver elements of teaching and learning. There were mixed feelings on how effective this approach was. Some found it to be valuable, for example, in that it reassured parents especially in covering sensitive topics such as sexual health. Others found that they experienced practical challenges such as finding an appropriate slot that worked for both the external organisation and the school. Some also questioned the relative quality of the provision, and its effectiveness in teaching and learning:

There are areas where staff looked to experts for — when you think of puberty and how that's addressed in schools — and usually how they were delivered by [the external organisation]. Now they're outdated a lot of the time in terms of their approach [...]. So I think there is work to be done there as well in terms of what, how and how often [we draw on external organisations].

Practitioner, Primary School

The Importance of Quality of Resources and Support

A key thread running throughout all aspects of these conversations was that of the importance and challenges of identifying high-quality resources and support. These included professional learning opportunities, resources, and external organisations. For some, this created challenges, including in increasing the scale of adaptations required to align with learner needs and in reflecting the general sentiment of RSE.

9 Conclusions

Overall, the Pilot provided a range of valuable insights into how schools approach RSE, as well as the practical enablers of and barriers to planning and preparation. It has drawn out a range of lessons and suggestions that other schools across Wales may wish to consider as they approach the new curriculum.

The experiences of Pilot schools serve to highlight the importance of the knowledge, experience and confidence held by leads and broader colleagues in supporting their engagement with RSE. Allowing time and space for sense making, including in exploring the RSE Code and Statutory Guidance, may be valuable in supporting progress in embedding RSE within a school's curriculum. Ensuring that leads have access to high-quality, professional dialogue and learning opportunities may also be valuable, especially for practitioners who may be new to teaching RSE.

The experiences of participating schools suggest that there is a positive relationship between knowledge and confidence. As leads became more familiar with the new RSE curriculum, they tended to report fewer substantive concerns and that they were more content with how they could approach teaching and learning. The importance of and approaches to ensuring developmentally appropriate teaching and learning was a key consideration in building confidence.

Together, engagement with RSE was considered to be a journey, from sense making to practical steps in planning and preparing a curriculum within their setting. Over the course of the Pilot, schools were able to make significant progress, especially in developing understanding of how RSE could be embedded within their setting. Some schools had been able to practically consider how to embed RSE across the curriculum. This suggests that time and space are also important, in which practitioners explore, experiment with and then implement RSE.

Impact of the Pilot

The Pilot resulted in a range of positive outcomes, both for participating schools and in informing the development of support offered to schools across Wales. The views and perspectives of schools informed the strengthening of the draft RSE Code and Statutory Guidance. Broader insights informed the development of a national approach to professional learning and teaching as well as learning resources with which to support schools. This report is intended to share learning and experiences with other schools across Wales. Participating schools had also highlighted the impact of the Pilot in supporting their engagement with RSE:

I've been really grateful to be a part of this. From about October time, it's been really helpful. It has been a really positive experience here at [the school].

Practitioner, Primary School

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