

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

1st Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday 18
January 2023

PE1918: Improve sex education in schools

Petitioner	Kate Freedman
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reform sex education by updating guidance and implementing clear teaching rules, focusing on topics such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Menstruation and related illnesses- Puberty- LGBT sex, including asexuality- Fertility- Pornography- Any other things that are deemed useful
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1918

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [23 March 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to Education Scotland and the Scottish Government.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received a new response from the Scottish Government which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1918: Improve sex education in schools

Petitioner

Kate Freedman

Date lodged

06/10/2021

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reform sex education by updating guidance and implementing clear teaching rules, focusing on topics such as:

- Menstruation and related illnesses
- Puberty
- LGBT sex, including asexuality
- Fertility
- Pornography
- Any other things that are deemed useful

Previous action

I have emailed my MSP and received no response from them.

Background information

I have researched sex education for a year and a half. As a current student I found the education within schools to be lacking and caused me to have to look to YouTube for basic information from sex educators like Hannah Witton. It was there I found information I should have already known from school. There is a big taboo around sex which can cause lots of issues. I've struggled with my periods for years as they are very irregular. I felt very alone and confused because I didn't understand what was happening. It was only after doing research I felt confident enough to go to a doctor where I got diagnosed with PCOS. I surveyed 150 students in my school on a scale of 1-10, most people rated period education at 1-3. I am often shocked by the lack of knowledge many young people have surrounding sex and it needs to change.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1918 on 23rd March 2022

The Convener: We have a couple of new petitions to consider. PE1918, by Kate Freedman, is a petition to improve sex education in schools. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reform sex education by updating guidance and implementing clear teaching rules, focusing on topics such as menstruation and related illnesses; puberty; LGBT sex, including asexuality; fertility; pornography and any other aspects that are deemed useful.

The petitioner conducted a survey of 150 students in their school and found that most people rated their period education at one to three out of 10. The petitioner references a general lack of knowledge by many young people surrounding sex and shares their own experience as a student. They felt that school sex education was lacking and subsequently sought more detailed information on YouTube.

The Scottish Government's response to the petition outlines the existing resources for relationships, sexual health and parenthood learning. Those resources are hosted on a central website, which was developed and published by a collaborative partnership of health boards and local authorities. The resources include learning activities and information on the topics raised by the petitioner.

The Scottish Government states that the curriculum is not mandatory and that it is up to teachers to decide which resources they deliver. It also indicates that it is committed to updating the current RSHP teaching guidance and to issuing that for public consultation in the new year.

The SPICe briefing provides background information on the current statutory guidance and indicates that the Scottish Government has been reviewing that over recent years. At the time of writing, neither the new guidance, nor the draft guidance, had been published.

It is some years since I was at school. No information was offered to us. That is not contemporary. I have drawn the petition to the attention of a number of younger people, who have all been in school more recently and should have benefited from the current information and practice. They universally said that it was absolutely rubbish. That very much supports the petitioner's view of the quality of the education, although the young people were not terribly sure that they would have wanted it to be better either, so that is slightly at odds.

I think we would want to take further action to clarify the submissions that we have received. Do colleagues have any suggestions or comments?

Ruth Maguire: I have one reflection from having previously been on the education committee. There are often calls for very specific things to be taught. That is not how our system works, which I guess also applies to the topic of relationships and sexual

health. That is not something only for teachers to tell children about; it is a job for the whole community, or perhaps for families.

I suggest that we write to Education Scotland to ask how it is monitoring implementation of the current teaching resources. We might also want to hear from the Scottish Government on how the views of children and young people are taken on board and used to influence policy in this area. We probably also want to know when the public consultation will open and how it will be promoted to children and young people, and when the Government anticipates that the revised guidance will be in place.

I seem to recall that the education committee did some work in this area quite recently, although it might not have been that recently. Perhaps the clerks could find out. I realise that colleagues might wish to reach out to stakeholders, but I am keen that we do not duplicate work, so we should check on what has been happening in other areas.

The Convener: Are members content to pursue our consideration of the petition on that basis?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I very much take your point about calls for specific things to be taught. What is important is that what is taught is thought to be useful by those at whom it is ultimately aimed, and I think that that is where part of the issue lies. At the moment, the young people at whom what is taught in this area is aimed do not think that that is the case.

Paul Sweeney: I suggest that we also write to each of the local authorities to get an assessment of what their current provision is. It might be helpful to get an understanding of how each local authority manages the provision of sex education in their schools. Some schools will have teachers who are specially trained, while in some areas, there might be a team that goes round different schools. It would be interesting to find out what each local authority is doing, and that might help to inform the petitioner.

Ruth Maguire: While I do not in any way disagree with my colleague Paul Sweeney, I ask that we be thoughtful about how we proceed. We do not want to just generate lots and lots of correspondence. Perhaps we can do a bit of desktop research to find out what the differences might be from the point of view of guidance.

The Convener: I think that Ruth Maguire's suggestion that we check with the Education, Children and Young People Committee to find out when the issue might most recently have been considered is a useful one.

Paul Sweeney: Okay. I am happy to rest on that.

The Convener: There might be some further information in relation to local authorities that is already available, which we can obtain. I can remember the matter coming up at hustings in schools. It falls within a particular area, the acronym for which I cannot remember—is it PHSA?

We will reserve the option of writing to local authorities if we find that we do not have the further information that is required.

Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 5 October 2022

PE1918/C: Improve sex education in school

Thank you for the e-mail on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee with further questions regarding the Scottish Government's response to Petition PE1918 seeking to improve sex education in schools. I apologise for the delay in responding and would like to thank you and the Committee for your patience.

The Committee was keen to understand the points raised below which I will respond to in the same order:

1. how the views of children and young people are taken on board and used to influence policy in this area;
2. when the public consultation will open and how it will be promoted to children and young people; and
3. when the Government anticipates that the revised guidance will be in place.

The existing RSHP teaching guidance makes clear schools should give children and young people an opportunity to exercise their right to identify and express their own educational needs in RSHP education. It states that in preparing programmes, it is good practice for schools to consult with children and young people and respond to their views appropriately, to ensure RSHP education meets the needs of all children and young people in the school or educational setting. It is good practice for schools to collaborate with and involve young people in the codesign of RSHP programmes in order to ensure they are kept relevant to their needs and interest.

At a local strategic level, there have been several examples of local engagement seeking views of children and young people on RSHP education policy. For example, research conducted on behalf of Glasgow City Council¹ in 2014 to gather young people's views on sexual health and relationship education highlighted young people say they would like to spend more time on RSHP education, and want teachers to 'get into the detail'. The topics of social media, the impact of pornography and how boys and girls relate to each other were

highlighted as areas requiring more depth of discussion. In 2016, Make it Good² by NHS Tayside who wanted to get insight from young people about their romantic and sexual relationships to help inform communication of positive sexual health messages to young people especially when it comes to contraception and condom use. This works best when it is influenced by what people say their lives are like. Young people's insight from that project pointed to the need to learn about pornography, but that to date school has not provided such an opportunity.

At a national level, the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee investigation into Personal and Social Education³, which young people were a key contributor to, highlighted in terms of core issues, sex and relationships education is essential and must feature. To be effective this means learning which goes beyond the biology and involves talking about sex and relationships (not just watching videos and reading leaflets as is the case in some classes). The Committee received concerning evidence that for some young people, particularly LGBTI young people, sex education comes from the internet, including pornography, due to a lack of adequate provision within school. Allied with anecdotal knowledge and experience of practitioners from health boards and local authorities who work with teachers on training and support for sexual health learning, the views of children and young people gathered through such work have been at the forefront of policy makers' minds as the RSHP policy has developed. This has led to, for example, development of a suite of teaching resources to deliver more relevant and engaging RSHP education based on what children and young tell us they want. We have also taken account of the views of children and young people gathered through the sources outlined above as we have developed the revised RSHP teaching guidance.

Preparations for the public consultation on the revised RSHP teaching guidance are almost complete and we expect to publish it shortly. The consultation is expected to run for 16 weeks. As part of the preparations to publish the consultation, we are exploring how we might best gather the views of children and young people on the revised RSHP teaching guidance to ensure their views are taken into account before it is published.

Finally, the Scottish Government is working to have the revised RSHP teaching guidance available to school staff as early in the 2023-24 academic year as possible, subject to the outcomes of the public consultation.

I hope the Committee find this letter helpful.