

Dear

Mr. William Powell AM (Chair)

Mr. Russell George AM

Ms. Bethan Jenkins AM

Ms. Joyce Watson AM

10/06/2015

**REF.: P-04-636 Statutory Sex and Relationships Education (SRE)**

I am writing in response to the letter from Mr. Huw Lewis AM, Minister for Education and Skills, which was forwarded to us on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> June 2015.

We understand and acknowledge the efforts and the work that has been undertaken to make the school curriculum in Wales relevant and fit to prepare young people for the challenges ahead. We also acknowledge the commitment already shown to equality, especially in passing recent legislation that will allow for further work to be delivered in schools. However, we feel that this issue has been addressed with a 'majority view' in mind, and believe that it is the responsibility of the Welsh people to bring the needs of the minority to attention. For this reason, please let us address the different points raised in the letter in turn.

**Primary Schools**

The current policy regulating Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) delivery in primary schools fails both children with same-sex parents and those children that indeed start to identify in those early years of life, insofar that their family environments are not recognized and acknowledged. Recent research shows that only 33% of primary teachers have addressed family relationships that include same-sex parents, while 37% say their school does not allow them to teach LGBT issues (*The Teacher's Report*, Stonewall Cymru). This exacerbates the feeling of difference and undermines the principles of respect and equality the current system is based upon.

Although the Minister rightly states that primary schools must have an SRE policy and that it must be accessible to parents, this still leaves LGBT children and parents with no guarantee that the policy will be used in practice to its full extent. A statement of commitment to equality, as seen from the research mentioned above, does not automatically produce a delivery inclusive of LGBT families, especially if the teachers have no experience of the issues and/or have not had specific training.

### **Secondary Schools**

In Key Stages 3, 4 and 5, delivery includes information about Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STIs), HIV and how young people can keep themselves safe and healthy. Despite this, recent research shows that 75% of those young people have not received any information about the biological and physical aspects of same sex relationships in SRE classes (NAT, 2015). This is confirmed in Stonewall Cymru research (2012), which gives a value of '*more than four in five*'. This situation leaves children and young people open to mis-information and confusion and at risk of potentially dangerous consequences for their health. We believe the school environment to be an appropriate and safe vehicle for that information to be delivered but, under the current system, children and young people who identify as LGBT are effectively denied that right.

### **Parents/carers**

We are mindful of the concerns of parents/carers and the difficulties and worry some might experience regarding their children's sexual orientation/gender identity or indeed the type of information their children are exposed to. We also respect the right of parents/carers to make decisions about their own children's education and their right to withdraw their children from SRE classes. However, the way to reassure them and deliver quality information is not to leave decisions to individual primary schools, or leave LGBT issues out of the curriculum completely, as this creates a 'post code lottery' system as to how and what the children are going to be taught.

The way to reassure parents/carers – including LGBT families – is to provide a curriculum that is inclusive and relevant, consistent across Wales and delivered within an age-appropriate framework by properly trained teachers who are equipped to do their job well. We believe this can only be achieved if a compulsory element in the

contents of the curriculum is introduced that will in turn guarantee uniform standards across Wales.

Inclusive SRE is not about teaching children and young people about subjects that are inappropriate for their age or understanding, but it is about teaching them respect and equality in a way that reflects the realities of the society they live in. We believe that the word 'sex' in SRE may be the barrier, and we understand the subject to be Relationship Education, within which 'sex' can gradually take its place as and when it becomes relevant to the young people's life. Let us also make clear that when we talk of a compulsory element in provision, we do not refer to forcing children and young people into classes they or their families don't agree with, but rather a compulsory duty on the school to provide inclusive SRE, in line with the current legislation.

### **The curriculum review**

We recognize the importance of the curriculum review (*'Successful Futures'*) and the new *Violence against women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Bill* as vehicles to deliver inclusive SRE. The latter in particular establishes a training framework for schools that could be shared and utilised further. Our concern is that relevant LGBT issues should be part of that training package and are willing to work with other stakeholders to ensure this is the case. NAT (2015) also recommends a statutory requirement for SRE in primary and secondary schools and calls for the current guidance to be updated to include LGBT relationships and issues.

In regard to The Minister's comment about a 'Great Debate' we would be thankful if information could be provided to us on the outcomes of that debate (albeit we understand these are partial ones) and we would ask to be involved as stakeholders in the next stages of discussion.

We would also like to make clear that, as part of the drive to inclusive SRE we are proposing to address both sexuality and gender identity, as we believe that, although these are separate issues, awareness of all types of positive relationships at the earliest opportunity will be beneficial and relevant to all children, regardless of how they identify themselves. In 2013/14, 19 people from Wales attended the Tavistock and Portman Clinic in London for gender identity assessment and support; in general, the clinic has seen a +50% increase in referrals every year since 2009 (BBC, 2015).

We also appreciate the importance of the '*Respecting others*' guidance as a resource against bullying, but will reaffirm the necessity of having monitoring systems in place to measure the effectiveness of such guidance in practical terms and the actual difference it has made to LGBT children, young people and families. Research states that '*Only 27 per cent primary school staff in Wales say their school has a policy that addresses homophobic bullying (53% in secondary schools). 90 per cent primary school staff in Wales have not received any specific training on how to tackle homophobic bullying (79% in secondary schools)*' (Stonewall Cymru).

Also, please let us refer you to an opinion poll dated 17/02/2015; when the public was asked the question 'Should primary school children receive compulsory sex education lessons?' 86% of respondents voted yes while 14% were against.

Lastly, we would like to reiterate that we now have a once-in-a-generation chance to deliver a truly remarkable curriculum that will ensure that all children and young people in Wales are prepared for adult life. We urge you, the Members and the Committee Members not to let this chance pass by. Thank you for your time and support.



Yours sincerely

On behalf of ABFABB's participants and the Bridgend LGBT Forum

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## **Research**

*The Teacher Report*, Stonewall Cymru

*The School's Report*, Stonewall Cymru, 2012

*Boys who like Boys*, National AIDS Trust (NAT), 2015

*'Sex and relationship education for children in Wales isn't fit for the 21st century': Calls made for compulsory lessons in the subject for primary school children*, Walesonline.co.uk, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2015

*Referrals for young transgender people increase*, BBC, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2015.