

# The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) Centres

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Promoting Improvement



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## Contents

Introduction .....	2
Methodology.....	3
Summary of key findings .....	4
Recommended next steps.....	6
Policy and legislative background .....	9
Context.....	10
Main Findings.....	12
Pupil safety and safeguarding practices.....	12
External support for safeguarding .....	13
Safeguarding challenges.....	15
Learning and teaching.....	17
Learning for Life and Work .....	19
Addressing issues experienced by pupils.....	19
Dealing with sensitive aspects of the preventative curriculum.....	22
Review of the preventative curriculum.....	28
Consultation on the preventative curriculum: Pupils.....	30
Consultation on the preventative curriculum: Parents .....	32
Teacher confidence and skillset .....	33
Teacher Professional Learning .....	34
External agency input.....	35
CCEA and Education Authority Resources .....	37
Conclusion .....	39
Appendix A: Terms of reference.....	40
Appendix B: Previous ETI evaluations .....	41
Appendix C: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate .....	42
Appendix D: Notes .....	43
Appendix E: Schools/centres included in the evaluation visits .....	45

## Introduction

'It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.'

*(Frederick Douglass)*

The impact of the testimonies of children and young people posted on the ['Everyone's Invited'](#) website in 2021 was immediate. Government, universities, schools and colleges across the UK were forced to sit up and listen to the fact that young people's experiences of sexual harassment were similar across all education sectors and jurisdictions. Northern Ireland was no different, apart from in scale and size. The Department of Education (DE) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to consider how to assess the issues facing pupils and teachers as they faced the challenges of the present and the future. In response, ETI looked at the work being undertaken by other UK inspectorates, including Ofsted and Estyn. ETI inspectors decided to draw on that work rather than duplicate it and design a customised evaluation of the effectiveness of the delivery of preventative education in Northern Ireland (NI). Inspectors in attempting to baseline the implementation of the statutory curriculum, including the effectiveness of current practice in NI, were seeking to provide the starting point for a collaborative civic conversation on how best to support children and young people to become happy fulfilled citizens of the future. The terms of reference for the evaluation are provided in Appendix A.

Schools and EOTAS centres play a key role in safeguarding the children and young people in their care through the effective implementation of child protection policies and practices. Effective safeguarding practices extend beyond child protection arrangements and procedures which focus on protecting children and young people who are at risk of harm or neglect. A rich ethos and learning culture will be underpinned by: inclusive classrooms where all children and young people feel safe and supported; and a well-planned curriculum for personal development (PD), including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), delivered through high quality learning experiences. The report uses the term 'preventative curriculum' to encompass safeguarding practices, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) and RSE, in recognition of the breadth of delivery.

It focuses on the statutory PDMU curriculum which requires schools to give specific attention to pupils': emotional wellbeing; health and safety; relationships; and development of moral character. An effective preventative curriculum will also offer a medium to explore sensitive issues with children and young people, such as consent, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Questioning+ (LGBTQ+), domestic violence, sexual abuse and other contemporary social issues, in an age-appropriate way which helps them to develop appropriate protective behaviours.

Relationships and Sexuality Education is a statutory component of the following areas of learning in the NI curriculum: the PDMU area of learning in primary schools; and the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) area of learning at key stages (KS) 3 and 4 in post-primary schools.

The [Education \(Curriculum Minimum Content\) Order 2007](#) (NI) sets out the statutory minimum content that must be taught in all grant-aided schools from foundation stage to KS4 as part of the [NI curriculum \(KS3, KS4 - Overview\)](#). In making provision, teachers are expected to 'provide a balance of experiences' drawn from a list of examples, which are not in themselves statutory. To support the delivery of RSE, the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has published a number of guidance documents to assist schools/centres.

In 2022, for example, CCEA published an [RSE progression framework](#). Although this is also non-statutory, it is intended to support schools/centres to develop their preventative curriculum to ensure a progression pathway in RSE in particular from foundation stage to post-16. It sets out the key issues that should be covered at each Key Stage and the guidance is underpinned by a wide range of resources which are available for teachers to access on the CCEA website.

The responsibility to ensure that a quality, fit-for-purpose RSE programme is planned and delivered rests with school/centre leaders, including governors, which means that schools/centres can choose the content and extent of delivery in line with the statutory minimum entitlement and their beliefs and ethos.

The overarching aim of the NI Curriculum is to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives. A high-quality preventative curriculum provision is crucial to providing young people with the knowledge and information they need to stay safe, develop healthy relationships, beliefs and attitudes and to navigate the complex world around them. This report provides a starting point on which to build further discussion and build consensus as to how best to deliver those aims for all of our children and young people.

*Throughout the report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix D: Notes.*

## Methodology

ETI invited all schools (includes primary, post-primary and special unless otherwise indicated) and EOTAS centres (refers to all primary and post-primary EOTAS centres) to respond to an online questionnaire about their approaches and the challenges faced in delivering an effective preventative curriculum. A total of 509 responses\* were received from schools and EOTAS centres, who were then asked to administer a pupil questionnaire\*. There were 14,665 pupil responses to the questionnaire from pupils

in years 7, 10, 12 and 14 who provided their views about how well they are learning to make informed choices and keep themselves safe. As an alternative to the questionnaire, focus group meetings took place with pupils in six special schools to ascertain their views.

ETI inspectors carried out 50 visits to a representative sample of primary, post-primary and special schools, and EOTAS centres (Appendix E) to review safeguarding practices, evaluate the quality of the preventative curriculum and identify exemplars of effective practice. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the timing and scope of some of the visits. The school/centre visits included 31 meetings with representatives of boards of governors. Additional meetings also took place with seven groups of parents (the term parent is used to denote anyone with parental responsibility).

## Summary of key findings

The staff in the schools/centres visited, work to good effect to safeguard pupils, and their child protection arrangements comply with the relevant guidance from DE.

Almost all primary pupils and most post-primary pupils feel safe in school and know who to speak to in their school/centre and how to get help if they are unhappy or worried about their safety or wellbeing. (See section: Pupil safety and safeguarding practices)

Governors are knowledgeable and well-informed about child protection and safeguarding arrangements and procedures, although less so about the broader preventative curriculum and the statutory content within it. (See page 13)

The staff in schools/centres are working effectively to support the emotional health and wellbeing (EHWB) of pupils using a range of approaches, including tailored nurturing approaches\*. Schools report that over the last two years the main concern in relation to safeguarding is their pupils' mental health. A significant number of pupils exhibit difficulties with anxiety, social interaction, concentration and attachment, and schools/centres report that they encounter lengthy delays in accessing appropriate external support for those pupils who need it. (See section: Safeguarding Challenges)

The Child Protection Support Service (CPSS) in the Education Authority (EA) is highly valued by schools/centres for its effective and trusted advice and support when responding to challenging safeguarding issues and concerns. (See section: External support for safeguarding)

The growing use of social media and the implications for pupils' online safety represent a significant challenge for schools/centres. An increasing number of online bullying and digital safeguarding incidents, which impact negatively on pupil relationships in school, take place beyond the school day. Addressing these external issues during the school day requires significant time and effort on the part of teachers and senior leaders. (See section: Safeguarding Challenges)

There is considerable variation in the effectiveness and range of approaches taken by schools/centres in delivering the taught elements of the preventative curriculum. There are significant gaps in the provision within and across key stages in many individual schools/centres. The result is that pupils do not have the opportunity in school to develop, in a consistent or progressive manner, sufficient knowledge and skills to make informed choices and keep themselves safe in an increasingly challenging, uncertain and complex world. (See section: Dealing with Sensitive aspects of the preventative curriculum)

Too many schools/centres avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE aspect of the preventative curriculum. These include teaching on: gender and sexual identity; LGBTQ+; sexual abuse; child sexual exploitation (CSE); domestic abuse/violence; and menstrual wellbeing. (Full breakdown in Figure 4 page 22)

The Gillen Review highlighted the need for the inclusion of consent as a key aspect of the preventative curriculum. Currently, 44% of all schools/centres report that they are delivering the topic of consent only to a small extent or not at all. (See page 26 and Figure 5.1)

There are inconsistencies in the frequency and rigour with which the preventative curriculum is reviewed and updated by schools/centres. Pupils, parents and governors have insufficient opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the content, review and impact of the preventative curriculum. This detracts from schools/centres' agility in responding to, and including in their RSE curriculum provision, important contemporary safeguarding and societal issues as they arise. (See section: Review of the preventative curriculum)

A common theme emerging from the pupils' written comments and in discussions is their frustration at not being consulted sufficiently on the content, relevance and delivery of the preventative curriculum. Over one-half (51%) of pupils indicated in the questionnaire returns, for example, that they had not had an opportunity to suggest topics they would like to discuss in PD/RSE. In order to have the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the world they live in, they want RSE to be reinforced consistently throughout the curriculum, and delivered within a school/centre culture based on respect and personal responsibility. (See section: Consultation on the preventative curriculum: Pupils)

The extent, quality and impact of teacher professional learning for the preventative curriculum are insufficient to support teachers to deliver a high quality education programme. The teaching workforce feels ill-equipped to take forward the delivery of a progressive preventative curriculum, in an integrated and consistent way, to the level sought by pupils. (See section: Teacher confidence and skill-set)

Not enough schools/centres are aware of, or use to good effect, DE's Emotional Health and Well Being (EHWB) framework and the associated CCEA support materials. The lack of investment in providing the associated teacher professional learning means many teachers have limited confidence and insufficient specialist knowledge and skills in the teaching of the more sensitive topics of the preventative curriculum. (See section: CCEA and Education Authority resources)

In the areas of gender and sexual identities, just under two-fifths of post-primary pupils report that their school culture is not a sufficiently welcoming and inclusive environments for all pupils. (See page 13)

There is a disconnect between the views of staff and pupils as to the relevance and usefulness of the LLW area of learning in developing skills and empowering pupils to make informed and responsible decisions. Just under one-fifth of pupils question the relevance and effectiveness of the PD aspect of LLW. (See section: Learning for Life and Work)

Primary school pupils often do not learn about menstrual wellbeing until the final term of year 7. This can be too late for many pupils in terms of their physical development, and limits opportunities for teachers to undertake follow up or consolidation work. (See page 27 – menstrual wellbeing)

In one-quarter of the primary schools visited, aspects of the preventative curriculum were not delivered during the periods of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in gaps in pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills.

## Recommended next steps

The current curriculum arrangements for the preventative curriculum are not effective enough in meeting the needs of children and young people. Many of the issues and challenges reported here have persisted for a long time.

It is critical that all stakeholders, led by DE and its professional advisors in CCEA, should:

- agree key principles around what makes an effective preventative curriculum;
- work towards developing curriculum delivery models which are in keeping with the aims of the statutory NI curriculum; and



- ensure all children and young people can access a preventative curriculum which is agile, contemporary, relevant and useful in their lives now and in the future.

The next steps in making this a reality are outlined below.

- The availability of additional curriculum time in schools is always a constraint, yet opportunities exist, through careful planning, within the existing curricular offer to address many of the gaps in the pupils' skills and knowledge identified in this report. Schools/centres, with support from relevant stakeholders, in particular CCEA, should identify and map how the skills and knowledge required to cope with life as a young adult can be delivered across the existing curriculum offer. Schools/centres should be able to provide pupils with access to a well-planned, creative, progressive and responsive programme of learning across the preventative curriculum, that is not an extra, but is integrated seamlessly into the existing curriculum offer.
- Schools/centres need to significantly increase the level of pupil participation and engagement to inform the content, delivery and impact of the preventative curriculum and to determine the extent to which the culture of the school/centre ensures inclusion and respect for all. They should also consult more widely with parents and governors in relation to the preventative curriculum and the vision and culture of the school/centre.
- DE has developed and/or commissioned a range of frameworks, hubs and resources. All of this work should now be streamlined into the design of programmes of learning which are fit-for-purpose and outline clearly progression in the learning opportunities across the various aspects of the preventative curriculum. This requires DE, supported by Arm's Length Bodies, to work systematically with schools/centres and support them to become more confident in the planning and delivery of comprehensive programmes of learning. Schools/centres should be encouraged and supported to view the centrally designed options as a starting point, upon which to build beyond the minimum entitlement and meet fully the needs of their pupils.
- There are too few opportunities for teachers to develop, or regularly refresh, the skills and expertise required to deliver an effective preventative curriculum, in particular aspects of RSE, that meets the needs of the pupils. The work outlined above needs to be accompanied by a comprehensive, high-quality programme of teacher professional learning to support teachers to deliver the more sensitive topics across the preventative curriculum.

- DE, working with the EA and other relevant stakeholders, should ensure there is more regular and effective governor professional learning to underpin more rigorous governance arrangements for the implementation of the preventative curriculum in schools/centres.
- DE should commission CCEA to review the relevance of the PD aspect of LLW, including the extent and effectiveness of its contribution to the preventative curriculum, and its efficacy as an externally accredited qualification.

The areas to be covered will remain complex and challenging but are not insurmountable. The difficulties schools/centres face can be compounded by the range of fast-changing and contemporary issues children and young people face. Additionally, the potential for a range of government strategies and policy areas, already developed or under development, to prescribe individually what must or needs to be taught, is likely to serve only to overwhelm schools/centres further, rather than improve the quality and extent of provision in these integral areas of the curriculum.

Inspectors are very aware of the complex context within which schools are delivering the preventative curriculum in NI. This includes: balancing the wide ranging views of parents; the age-appropriateness of some of the concepts for primary school children; and the differing views and beliefs of some teachers, governors, pupils and parents around what should be included in the curriculum. The content and delivery of the preventative curriculum can be emotive and is one of the few areas of the curriculum that crosses into family and moral thinking; school/centres need to be supported to deliver the preventative curriculum in a consistent manner which enables their pupils to think critically about a wide range of issues in an ever-changing world.

Schools/centres continue to perceive what are important issues as increasing the already multiple demands on their time. They are struggling to make choices related to the flexibility offered by the statutory NI curriculum and see each new strategy or policy as additional, rather than integral, to effective curriculum planning and delivery. The focus should be on the development of pupils' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours set within a culture of respect and responsibility. Guidance and reassurance for school leaders and governors in relation to how this can be led and managed will be required.

DE's work on revisiting the design principles of the NI curriculum, which is at an early stage of development, has the potential to go some way to addressing these tensions currently felt by schools/centres. The alternative could mean reverting to a compliance approach to the preventative curriculum where the prescribed range of issues are covered, but which do not develop the requisite skills, knowledge and understanding young people need to survive and thrive as young adults.

The Children and Young People's strategy is a possible vehicle to allow all government stakeholders to agree what is urgent, important and/or non-negotiable in curriculum delivery, while retaining the needs of each child and young person at the centre of decision-making. In so doing, decisions can flow upward from the child's perspective and needs, while also satisfying legal and statutory requirements in a manageable way for schools.

*An 'easy read' version of this report for pupils can be found on the ETI website.*

ETI will carry out follow-up activity to this report to evaluate the impact of the steps taken by stakeholders to address the issues and challenges in delivering an effective preventative curriculum that best meets the needs of pupils.

## **Policy and legislative background**

The Children Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) (2015) aims to improve the wellbeing of children and young people and to realise their rights. The outworking of this is outlined in [The Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030](#), which aims to ensure that children and young people 'learn and explore so that they grow to become resilient, confident young people who are well equipped to take on the challenges and opportunities that adulthood brings.'

In 2016, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DoH) and the Department of Justice (DoJ) published a joint seven-year strategy Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland; this strategy is in its final year. The action plan for year 7 (2022-2023) identifies the need for education to focus on wider preventative work and ensure that teachers have the necessary skills to teach sensitive subjects, including child abuse as well as domestic and sexual abuse, and coercive control.

The [Gillen Review](#) (2019) has brought a sharper focus to the delivery of justice in relation to serious sexual offences and recommends the implementation of a statutory and standardised RSE curriculum delivery in schools.

A call for views (January-March 2022) was launched to inform the development of two new strategies:

1. A Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy, led jointly by the Departments of Health and Justice, and in collaboration with the Departments for Communities, Education and Finance; and
2. An Equally Safe Strategy: A Strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls, led by the NI Executive Office.

An emerging theme within the summary reports for both strategies relate to mandatory and age-appropriate RSE which extends beyond school settings, for example in youth clubs, community organisations, higher education institutions and workplaces; they also make the point that ‘education’ is not limited to those of school age. To complement this work, training on [active bystander approaches](#) is taking place across organisations and departments to change attitudes, support people to intervene safely, recognise and address poor behaviours and create safe spaces for women and girls.

In 2019, the NI Executive Formation Act decriminalised abortion in NI in order to meet the recommendations of the 2018 Convention of Elimination of all forms of [Discrimination Against Women Committee Inquiry \(CEDAW\)](#), and paved the way for the introduction of a legal framework for abortion. Recommendation 86(d) requires the Secretary of State to ‘make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of the curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion and monitor its implementation’. To date, the Secretary of State has not acted on this requirement.

The NI Executive has agreed to develop a suite of social inclusion strategies within the [New Decade, New Approach](#) agreement. In addition, the Gender Equality and Sexual Orientation panels have published reports making recommendations on the themes and key actions each strategy should address. A number of the recommendations are specifically directed at improving education and the content of the RSE curriculum, including ‘all young people have access to age-appropriate relationship and sexuality education inclusive of [LGBTQ+](#) which is universal and not dependent on school ethos.’

## Context

In addition to the ongoing developments in policy and legislation, previous evaluations have been carried out by ETI on RSE involving post-primary schools ([2011 report](#)) and primary and special schools ([2016 report](#)). An [evaluation of preventative education and the statutory curriculum](#) (2014) was carried out in post-primary and special schools to inform the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation. These evaluations identified a range of issues which have not yet been addressed adequately. A concise overview of the effective and less effective practice in RSE from these evaluations is provided in Appendix B.

There has also been significant media, public and political interest in, and a diversity of opinions in relation to, the content and delivery of RSE within schools. Most recently this includes:

- Belfast Youth Forum's ['Any Use'](#) report which recommended government and policy makers: adopt a rights-based and proactive approach to RSE; work with young people to co-produce a RSE curricular programme for schools; and that such a curricular programme be taught by specialised, qualified and trained staff.
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international human rights treaty setting out the economic, social, civic, cultural and political rights of the child. All 41 Articles in the Convention interact to form an overarching interrelated set of rights for children and young people. In recent years there has been growing support for a rights-based approach to RSE.
- The [Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission \(2020\) submission](#) highlights that while RSE is a statutory component of KS 3 and 4, a school can provide such education in line with its ethos, which can include an opposition to contraception. The submission also documents that the lack of a standardised approach across schools/centres in NI results in a disparity regarding the effectiveness of relationship, sexuality and gender identity education that pupils are receiving.

It is clear there are a significant number of recommendations arising from investigations, reviews and evaluations into child safeguarding and preventative education with the result that the following priority areas of RSE have a high public profile: consent; violence against women and girls; domestic abuse; healthy sexual relationships; gender; transgender issues; contraception; pregnancy; abortion; menstrual health and wellbeing; and social media and online safety.

Collectively, the recommendations are making many demands on what should be included in the NI curriculum, which fall on schools/centres to deliver; they also seek to prescribe what the wider preventative curriculum should entail. This is contrary to the legislative provisions upon which the NI curriculum is built, namely that it is flexible and teacher-led in order to best meet the current and future needs of pupils and each school/centre's unique context. It is important that school/centre-based autonomy and flexibility to respond to contemporary issues is not lost by a purely legislative and prescriptive approach, which in itself does not guarantee high quality teaching, learning and provision.

The challenge remains to provide a preventative curriculum which is inclusive of all young people; is progressive, relevant, covered to the extent that children and young people require and encourages them to engage critically with their learning.

## Main Findings

### Are safeguarding procedures effective?

- [Pupil safety and safeguarding practices](#)
- [External support for safeguarding](#)
- [Safeguarding challenges](#)

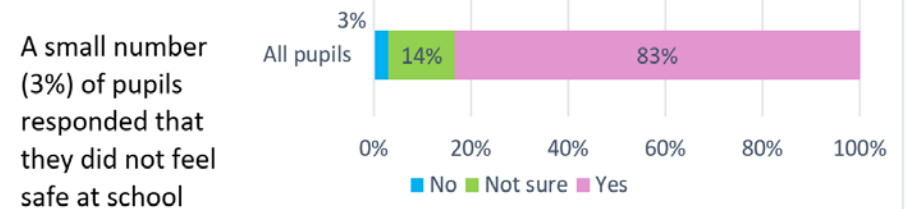
## Pupil safety and safeguarding practices

It is clear from the evidence that staff in schools/centres work to good effect to safeguard pupils, including throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, the pupils who completed the online questionnaire reported that they feel safe and cared for at school and know who to speak to if they are unhappy or worried.

The primary school pupils who completed the online questionnaire (including those attending EOTAS centres) reported very positively on their feelings of wellness and safety in school. Almost all of the pupils reported that they feel safe in school; 1% reported that they do not feel safe in school. Similarly, almost all of them know who to speak to in school if they are worried or need help. Most primary pupils reported that they are treated fairly in school, with under 4% of them reporting that they are not; boys were more likely than girls to feel they are not treated fairly. Most primary pupils reported that their school has taught them how to look after their emotional and mental health, and physical health.

The post-primary school pupils who completed the online questionnaire (including those attending EOTAS centres) also reported that they feel safe in school, with around 6% of them reporting that they don't. Most of them also know who to talk to if they have a concern or need help. In discussions with pupils in special schools, all reported that they feel safe in school, and they were able to identify staff in school they could speak to if they had a problem or were worried.

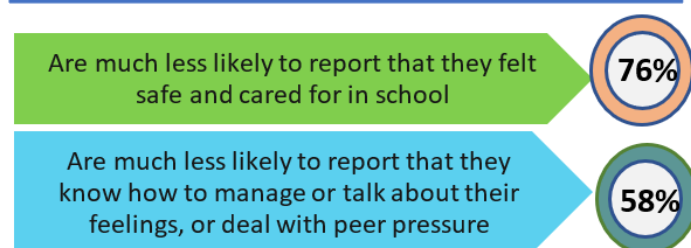
### I feel safe in school?



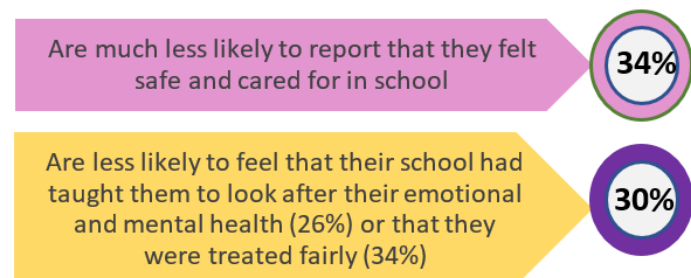
Across the primary and post-primary pupil questionnaire returns, the small number of pupils who identify as 'other' in terms of gender are much less likely to report that they feel safe in school. These pupils are also more than twice as likely to report that they don't know how to manage or talk about their feelings, or deal with peer pressure. School/centre leaders will need to give more thought to the culture of inclusion across their organisation and keep it under review.

## Pupils who identify as 'other' in terms of gender (220, 2%)

### What primary pupils said!



### What post-primary pupils said!



Almost all schools/centres (92%) report that they support pupils effectively with safeguarding issues and that designated safeguarding staff have been trained by the EA in child protection. In 31 of the school/centre visits, discussions were held with governors. The evidence from these discussions shows that they too are knowledgeable and well-informed about the broad child protection and safeguarding arrangements within the school/centre for which they have responsibility. From the school/centre visits there are instances of effective practice, for example:

- placing a strong emphasis on developing appropriately their safeguarding teams;
- building the capacity of newer members of the safeguarding team and providing support through weekly discussion and review of their response to safeguarding concerns;
- working with the area learning community\* to provide information to parents on online safety; and
- working with a range of external agencies, along with use of the Safer Schools App, to reinforce safeguarding messages.

## External support for safeguarding

A majority (71%) of the schools/centres report in questionnaires that staff knowledge and understanding of effective child protection practices improved by a large or very large extent as a result of the training from the EA CPSS. Appropriate initial and refresher child protection training is provided for governors, principals and designated teachers. However, in discussion with the governors, many of the governors highlighted a lack of relevant EA training and information sessions on the preventative curriculum, which they need, to fulfil better their oversight role and challenge function.

The CPSS service is highly valued by schools/centres, with over one-quarter of additional written responses affirming, in particular, the high-quality support and guidance provided.

“CPSS are amazing - they are always available and give clear guidance and support.” (Special school)

Most settings (87%) report in the questionnaire returns that they have adequate support from external agencies in responding to child protection/safeguarding issues. The written responses, however, highlight challenges relating to the support provided by health and social services. In particular, the schools/centres report that changes in staffing and regular staff absences are resulting in a lack of consistency in key worker support by social services for pupils, their families and the schools/centres themselves.

“Our support from social services is inconsistent and at times inadequate. There would appear to be high levels of staff absence in our Trust leading to regular rotation of staff. Also, the encrypted email system is laborious.” (Post-primary school)

“The quality and effectiveness of support from Social Services in responding to pupil safeguarding issues has simply not been good enough.” (EOTAS centre)

The ever-growing increase in the need for specialist mental health support for pupils has created a strain on the Children and Adolescence Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Schools/centres report significant issues such as lengthy delays, caused by long waiting lists, in accessing this specialist help and expertise. This is adding considerably to the pressures felt by staff in dealing with, at times, extremely complex mental health issues being experienced by pupils.

“Current levels of mental health concerns (particularly anxiety) and incidents of self-harm amongst our young people are putting such strain on already stretched external support agencies and are beyond the capacity of school staff to manage. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service waiting lists are long and General Practitioners appear to be unable to access specialist services (according to parents); young people are having to wait to access much needed expertise or support. School Family Works counselling is very helpful, but with only one day per week, there are many pupils who either go without or who have to wait.” (Post-primary school)



## Safeguarding challenges

The questionnaire responses from a majority (72%) of schools/centres confirm that mental health was the main safeguarding issue they had to address in the past year, with online digital safety (49%) also featuring strongly (**Figures 1, 1.1**).



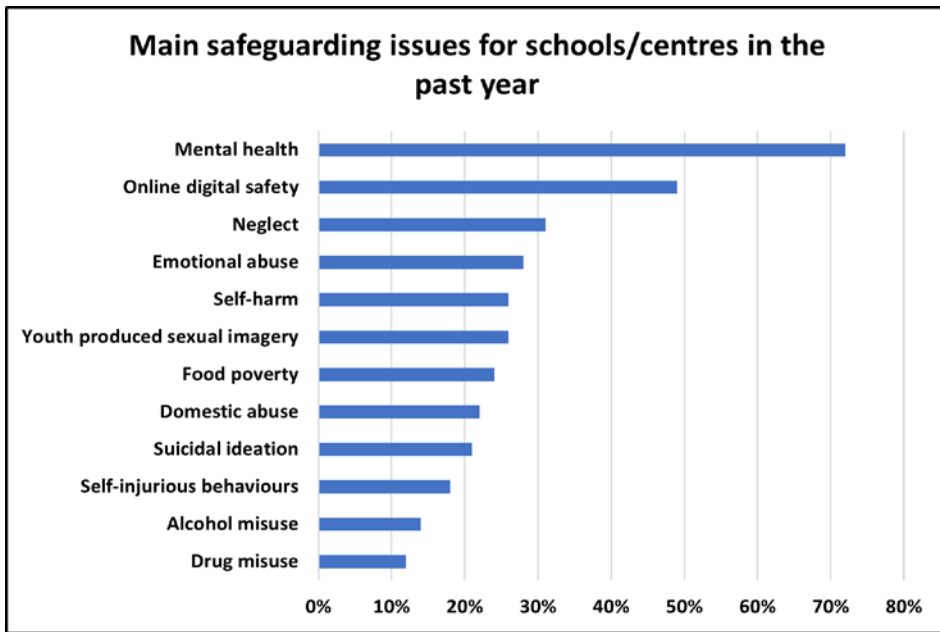
The evidence from the school/centre visits also highlights the significant number of pupils exhibiting difficulties with: attendance; social interaction; concentration; and attachment.

Staff in schools/centres are doing their best to respond to the needs of the pupils and to put in place individual interventions while waiting for specialist mental health support.

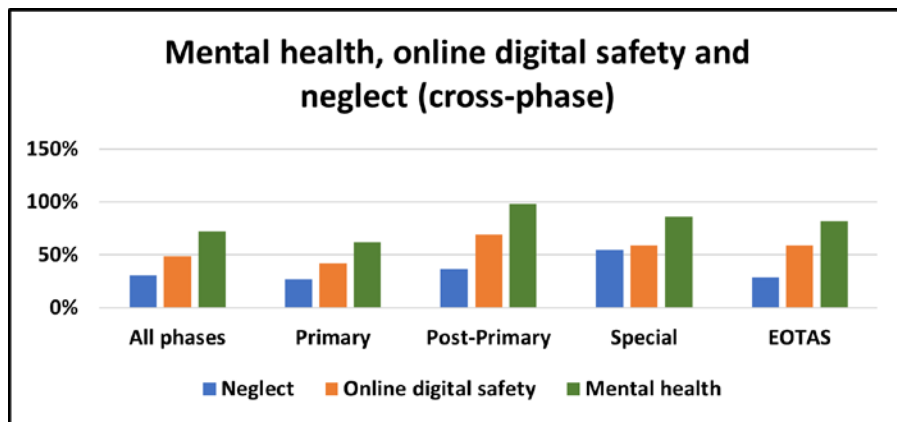
### Example of effective practice

**A primary school has developed a number of nurturing approaches to support more effectively the individual emotional wellbeing of their pupils. Strategies include the development of nurture clubs, relaxation and sensory rooms, daily mile and art therapy. Pupils are also referred to a number of non-statutory agencies for support. All of the work is underpinned and supported by staff professional learning in adverse childhood experiences, trauma informed practice and youth work methodologies.**

**Figure 1: The extent to which schools/centres had to address specific safeguarding issues in the past year, including during the two periods of remote learning.**



**Figure 1.1: Main safeguarding issues schools/centres face (by phase).**



Across the phases, during visits, senior and middle leaders reported that there is a significant and ever-growing challenge in dealing with social media issues and online safety. Specifically, there is a growing number of online bullying and digital safeguarding incidents, such as sexting and sharing related images. Many of these incidents take place beyond the school day, but the wellbeing of pupils is adversely impacted and the incidents surface in schools/centres, requiring time, support and, quite often, some form of adult intervention. In the primary sector, for example, the pupils communicate with each other online via games and various applications (Apps). Principals report that the primary pupils quite often do not tell their parents when bullying incidents occur, as they are concerned that their access to the game or App will then be removed or restricted. Primary pupils identified a number of areas they would like to know more about.

“The dangers of social media for example, Tik Tok and Snapchat.”

“Things that could affect our mental health that is said online.”

“How to tell if a person that says they are 12 to see if they actually are.”

“Internet safety.” (Primary pupils)

In special schools, the staff report concerns that protective filters which are in place in school to prevent access to inappropriate sites, may not be in place at home.

In the post-primary online pupil questionnaire responses, 55% of pupils report that they think their school deals with all forms of bullying, including online, in a fair way (as compared with 81% in primary). Dealing with incidents of bullying is a complex and time-consuming process for schools/centres, but as the feedback from pupils demonstrates, it is an issue which post-primary schools need to tackle in line with the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016, which came into operation in September 2021. ([DE Circular 2021/12](#) provides advice for schools on their responsibilities following commencement of the Act; and provides details of the accompanying statutory guidance for schools and boards of governors.)

### Delivery of the preventative curriculum

- [Learning and teaching](#)
- [Learning for Life and Work](#)
- [Addressing issues experienced by pupils](#)
- [Dealing with sensitive aspects of the preventative curriculum](#)

## Learning and teaching

As part of the evaluation, inspectors observed 70 lessons, across all phases; the characteristics of effective learning and teaching observed include:

- effective questioning to develop pupils' thinking and level of understanding;

- paired and group work to provide opportunities for discussion and extended responses; and
- creative cross-curricular, active and contextualised learning to motivate and engage pupils in the learning.

These approaches correlate with the pupil questionnaire responses identifying their preferred learning methods, including: games or physical activity (44%); discussions in small groups (40%); drama/role play (38%); working with a partner (37%); and debate (31%).

“A true story about a drug addict and to understand what they go through.”

“A whole class discussion with a teacher that understands and respects opinions ..... I like when the whole class asks questions and then we get the best answers we can get.”

(Primary pupils)

Pupils also raised the importance of teacher sensitivity, particularly during group/discussion work. In the discussions with pupils, during almost all school/centre visits, they emphasise the importance of supportive, nurturing and trusting relationships with staff. Although debates can be an important and powerful teaching tool, if not handled sensitively, they can have a detrimental effect for some pupils.

“Class debates about the morality of homosexuality, other religions, or non-cisgender identity\* are not appropriate. No-one should have to sit in a classroom and have their identity berated.”

“Group discussion and debates will not work and only end up hurting someone when the information is not taught or explained in a way that everyone understands and is comfortable with.” (Post-primary pupils)

“Make it more enjoyable. Don’t give the same Powerpoint every year, have variation.”

“Not using bad videos from years ago that are outdated and uninteresting.”

“More creative ways using art, drama or music could be incorporated to improve this. Fun learning strategies like games. Drama and debate could be good as it allows people to express themselves, their feelings and their emotions through characters.”

“Year 12-14 should not be receiving the same lessons received in year 8-10. More mature topics need to be discussed because a lot of people do not receive advice on relationships and sex from anywhere else other than school.”

“Most of our education on sex and relationships was presented in year 8 Science and then later in Year 11 LLW. I think that it could be beneficial to learn more gradually throughout different years at school rather than having one short session of sex education every few years. A little bit of time spent on it each year, tailored to that specific year group, could work better”.

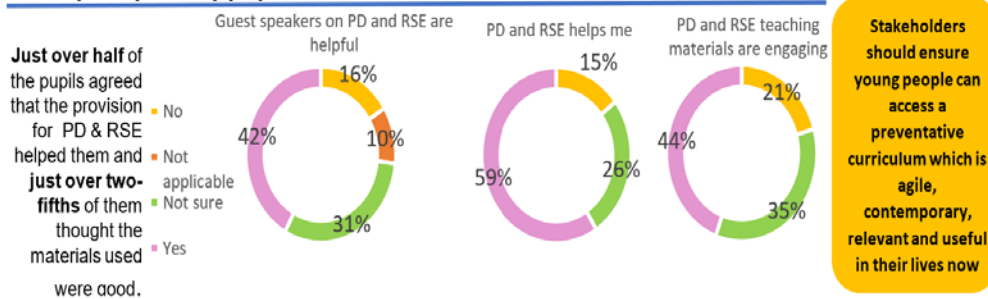
“Teach different types of sex education as it wasn’t taught correctly and only for heterosexuals. It was also shamed upon very heavily by teachers.”

“I think extra knowledge is required so that, when faced with uni next year and in a much bigger dating pool, education on relationships, dating and sex would be beneficial to our safety and enjoyment.” (Post-primary pupils)

The pupil questionnaire responses indicated that they disliked learning about PDMU through teacher presentation (25%), worksheets (14%) and research/topic work (13%). Post-primary pupils repeatedly highlighted in written comments that they wanted a more progressive learning experience which was not boring and repetitive.

### Thoughts on the preventative curriculum

#### What post-primary pupils said!



## Learning for Life and Work

There is a clear disconnect between the views of staff and pupils as to the relevance and usefulness of LLW in developing and empowering post-primary pupils to make informed and responsible decisions. Staff in just over one-half (53%) of post-primary schools/centres believe to a large or greater extent that it is relevant, in comparison to just 19% of year 14 pupils\*. Many pupils question the relevance and effectiveness of the PD aspect of LLW .

One-third of year 14 pupils who responded to the questionnaire had studied LLW at GCSE with many of them indicating that the subject was in no way useful to them in terms of preparation for life after school. There are necessary restrictions and parameters which have to be in place in order for LLW to be an accredited qualification. This raises the question as to whether an accredited LLW qualification is the most appropriate approach to delivering to good effect key aspects of the preventative curriculum? It is important that there is consultation with pupils so that they have access to a course which is contemporary, relevant and useful in their lives.

“Topics covered in LLW aren't properly preparing students for life after school.”

“Most of the topics we cover aren't particularly ‘empowering’, they are quite useful for the future, but not empowering”

“It gives a good understanding of how to be responsible in real life situations”.

“Teaches people about the real world and how to develop as an individual.”

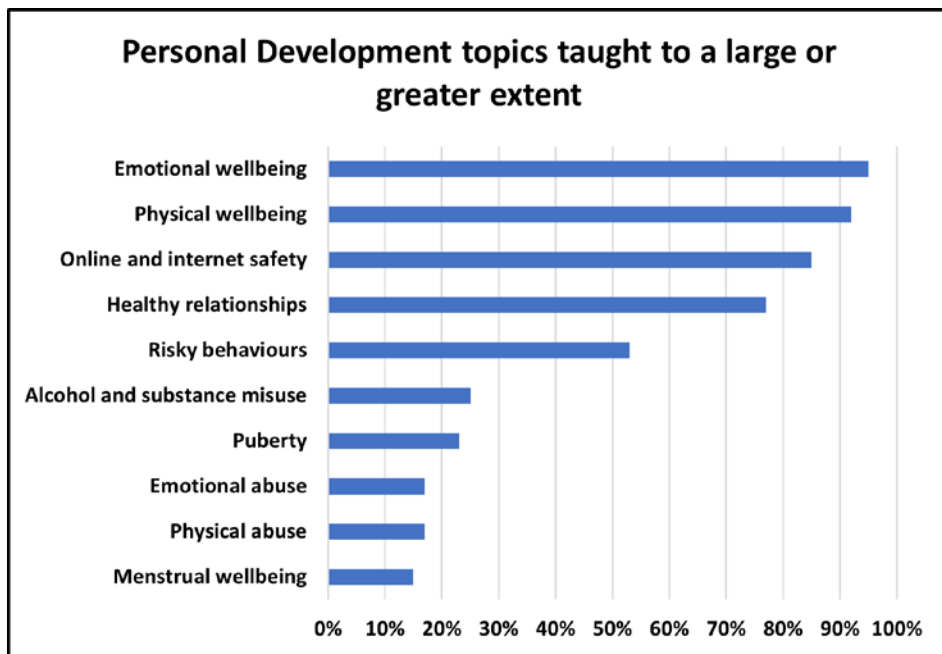
“Good content but slightly outdated” (Post-primary pupils)

In discussions, pupils in special schools indicated their preference for the life skill units over other units, which they found boring. Staff also highlighted the need for more emphasis on preparation for life and relationships which is tailored to the level of pupil understanding.

## Addressing issues experienced by pupils

Responses to the school/centre questionnaires show that pupils feel that their school/centre deals well with topics relating to emotional and physical wellbeing, online digital safety and healthy relationships (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 2: Personal development topics taught to a large or greater extent (across all phases).**



This is also borne out in the pupil questionnaire responses across the primary schools and EOTAS centres.

“In our school we have our own fidget boxes and daily journals. Our fidget boxes help us to destress and get any annoyance out of our heads, the daily journals help us with our mental health and to express our personal feelings. We also have a sensory room, nurture room and sensory garden..... the sensory room helps me to keep calm and have good vibes flowing out of me. I love these rooms!!!! (Primary pupil)

In special schools, pupils talked about how their knowledge of wellbeing, healthy relationships and online digital safety was developing and what further information they require.

“We have talked with our teacher about stranger danger, safety in the water and cleaning our bodies”.

“Your mental health is more important than your physical health as it’s not like a broken leg, sometimes people can’t see that you don’t feel great”.

“We know not to share passwords, give out personal information and use two factor authentication but you need help with that”.

“I think we need to learn more about the emotional side of growing up as well as the physical stuff”.

“We learn a bit about boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. I’d like to learn more about romantic relationships and what happens when a relationship ends”. (Special school pupils)

Post-primary pupils also highlighted that they value opportunities to take on leadership roles through, for example, mental health/anti-bullying ambassadors, Take Five\* champions and pupil-led equality and diversity or gay/straight alliance groups.

In the school/centre visits, there were many examples of effective practice in responding to the pupils' EHWB issues, such as:

- widening the remit and make-up of their pastoral teams in order to meet more effectively the individual needs of the pupils;
- the addition of home-school liaison officers, youth service personnel and school counsellors;
- the use of DE funding\* to support wellbeing by developing outdoor learning, sensory areas, nurturing approaches and therapeutic interventions such as, LEGO-based therapy\*, therapy\*, art/music/pet and talking therapies; and
- the establishment of wellbeing teams to support EHWB, which is becoming much more common across schools/centres and which, in the more effective practice, is linked to review and delivery of the preventative curriculum.

### Example of effective practice

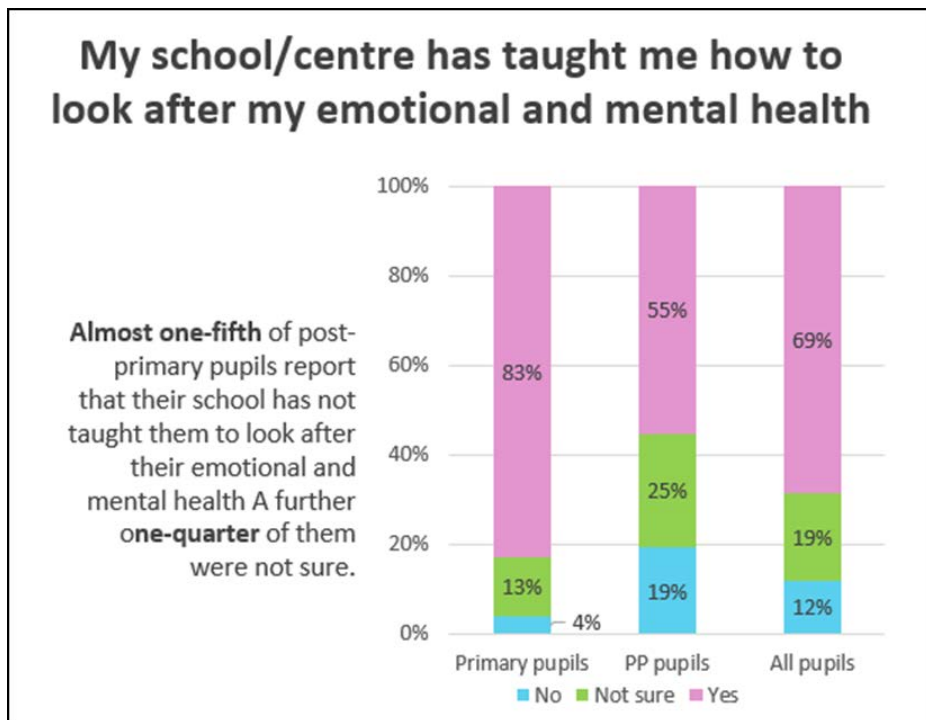
**A post-primary school identified a group of year ten girls who required a time-bound programme on healthy relationships in response to a recent incident. The impact of the intervention resulted in greater understanding of respect, positive decision-making, and a decrease in behavioural incidents. Fifteen teachers also volunteered to mentor year ten girls to support their emotional wellbeing and training was provided in trauma informed practice.**

It is important to highlight that in the post-primary pupil questionnaires responses, 74% of pupils report that the school has taught them how to look after their physical health, while over one-half (55%) say they are being taught how to look after their emotional and mental health.

“Lessons on how to cope with and improve mental health are usually vague. I believe that they could go more in depth on how to recognise the symptoms of mental health problems in ourselves and others, as well as alternatives to dealing with this, rather than just telling us to phone organisations.”  
(Post-primary pupil)

It is a concern that almost one-fifth (19%) of post-primary pupil responses indicate that their school has not taught them how to look after their emotional and mental health (**Figure 3**). Governors and leaders in all schools should be mindful of the need to monitor regularly the content and delivery of the curriculum to ensure that pupils receive the information and support they need to look after their emotional and mental health.

**Figure 3: Extent to which school/centre has taught pupils to look after their emotional and mental health.**

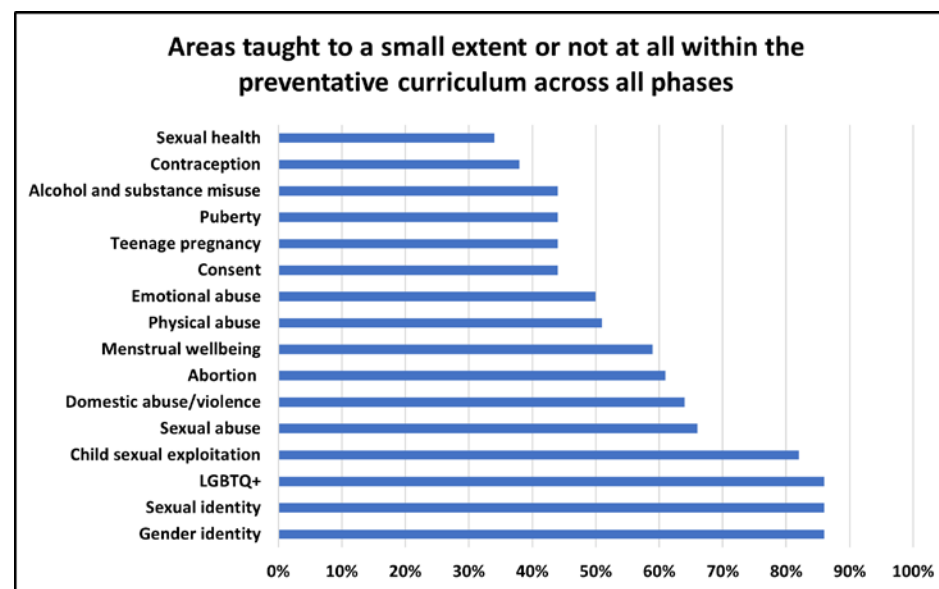


## Dealing with sensitive aspects of the preventative curriculum

In too many schools/centres, the evidence is clear that there is selectivity and potential avoidance of the areas taught within the preventative curriculum. As **Figure 4** illustrates there appears to be an avoidance of delivering the more sensitive aspects across all phases. During the inspector visits to school/centres, no

opportunities were provided to observe lessons on the following topics: consent; domestic abuse; gender; transgender issues; contraception; pregnancy and abortion and menstrual health and wellbeing.

**Figure 4: Preventative curriculum areas taught to a small extent or not at all, across all phases.**

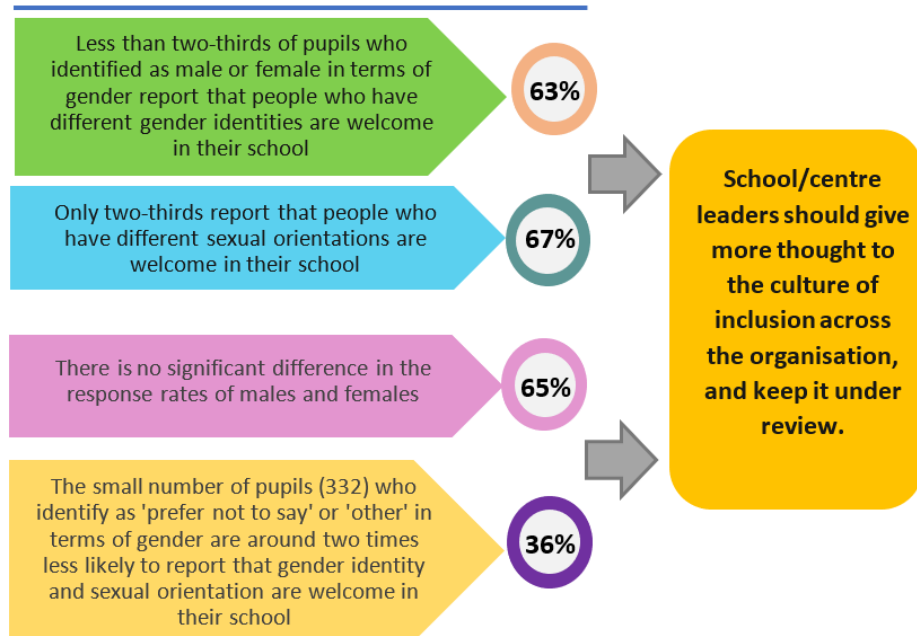


In written responses to the questionnaire and in discussions with inspectors, pupils reported that they would like to know more about key sensitive issues, in particular, gender identity, sexual orientation and LGBTQ+. Many post-primary pupils indicate in the online questionnaires that teachers regularly skip teaching certain sensitive subjects.



## Post-primary: Gender identity and sexual orientation

What the pupils said!



“Not just skim through the topics, the majority of these topics aren’t talked about fully and are talked about quickly so we aren’t getting the proper education and have to find information ourselves which can be misleading.”

“Having a teacher present who is actually comfortable with the topic, having a teacher who is not comfortable or awkward talking about the topic can make it extremely uncomfortable for students when they should feel comfortable and safe.”

(Post-primary pupils)

This correlates with the responses in the school/centre questionnaire (**Figure 4**), where 86% of schools/centres confirmed that these same three topics are only taught to a small extent or not at all. Clearly, there is a disconnect between the topics that pupils want to learn about and the reality of the curriculum which they experience.

“Gender equality: it may be a subject for teens but learning gender equality at a young age is very beneficial. By learning about gender equality it will teach people how to treat their peers and neighbours with the upmost respect, not based on their gender but based on their actions and morals.” (Primary pupil)

“How to deal with new feelings of attraction to the opposite gender.”  
“LGBTQ+ to show that it’s ok liking girls or guys or anyone and different sexualities people have. Because being a queer child myself, it’s not pleasant when people make fun of gay people.”  
(Primary pupils)

“To present and contrast different views of human sexuality in our culture, both traditional and progressive, to allow pupils to think critically about these issues.” (Post-primary pupil)

It is notable in the online questionnaire responses that 61% of post-primary pupils indicate that pupils with a different gender identity are made welcome in their school, with 66% reporting that those with a different sexual orientation are welcome.

“I would like to talk about feeling welcome in communities such as being part of the LGBTQ+ community and accepting people in the LGBTQ+ community as well as being taught that we are welcome.” (Primary pupil)

14,665  
pupils  
participated

“We have not been taught acceptance of sexualities in this school and there are quite a lot of homophobic pupils as a result of this. There are many pupils who do not understand different sexualities either and I think it is very important to teach it.”

“Students should be reassured that they are welcome and accepted.”

“I don’t like being at school because every time I hear my dead name called (name before transition) it is excruciating. However, I will never ask for this to change for fear of safety at home and at school. Trans issues are not taught about in school and I think this is important to be taught...”

“I personally don’t believe our school is inclusive to personal developments that don’t fit their ideologies, sexuality education has never been discussed other than in religious studies where it has been shunned and left for a debate rather than show support and safety for those students.”

(Post-primary pupils)

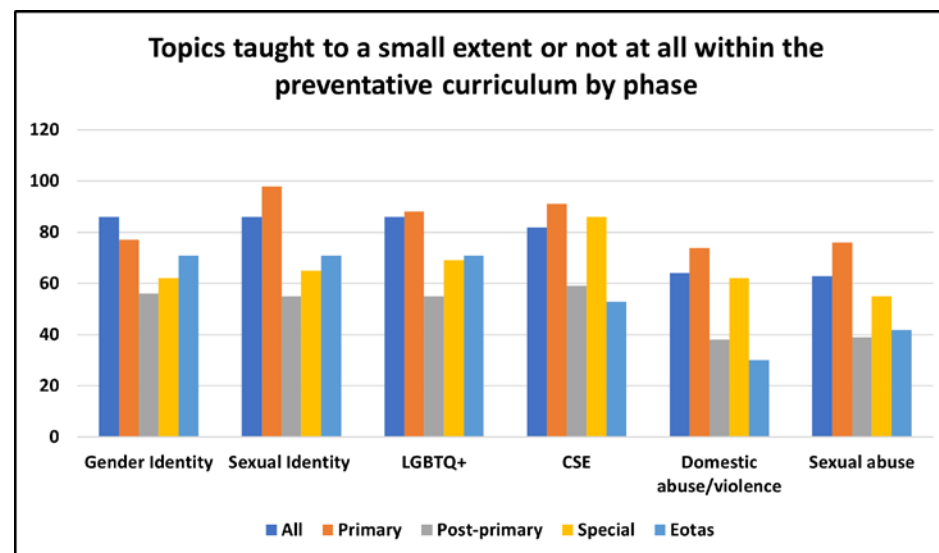
While inspectors observed some examples of effective practice (see below), schools/centres need to talk to their pupils in order to review their organisational culture in the areas of gender and sexual identities. Part of this review should identify how effectively schools/centres are supporting pupils to experience an inclusive and welcoming environment, regardless of their sexuality.

### Example of effective practice

In a primary school staff are supporting a pupil identifying as pansexual\* and the Board of Governors established a gender awareness sub-committee three years ago to be pro-active in the school's approaches to gender issues. The school also has a large number of refugee and asylum seeker children, with over twenty nationalities represented in the school enrolment. Staff have achieved an award for supporting pupils to integrate into the school while recognising and being supportive of their cultural diversity and heritage.

The evidence shows that the teaching of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) (**Figure 5**) is a low priority for some schools and centres. It is not good enough that just over two-thirds of primary schools, one-fifth of post-primary schools and just over one-quarter of EOTAS centres provide no teaching at all on CSE. This shows that little or no progress has been made since the [2014 evaluation](#), which identified that *“the term ‘child sexual exploitation’ is recognised by most of the teachers and some of the pupils, but it is not referred to explicitly or delivered as part of the personal development programme”*.

**Figure 5: Preventative curriculum topics taught to a small extent or not at all, by phase.**



Importantly, primary schools report that they are not teaching the following areas at all: consent (24%); menstrual wellbeing (23%); and puberty (10%). It is essential that consent is taught more effectively to pupils, in a way that takes account of their age and stage of development.

Given the high-profile nature of the Gillen Review, which highlights the inclusion of consent as a key aspect of the preventative curriculum, it is not good enough for pupils that 44% of all schools/centres report that they are delivering the topic of consent to a small extent or not at all. This aspect of the curriculum is too important for the potential wellbeing of pupils to be either omitted or skimmed over; it is an area which pupils want and need to develop their understanding, particularly within relationships. All of this points to the need for a system-wide debate among key stakeholders, including parents, around how the preventative curriculum is taught to primary pupils, in an age-appropriate fashion.

“Consent, not just yes or no but coercion in relationships, and further into the grey areas of consent such as withdrawing consent at any point during activities. I think this conversation is particularly important to have with boys during their teen years considering how prevalent sexual assault is”.

“Especially consent. You wonder why rape and sexual assault is such an issue but do nothing to teach morals around the topic”.

(Post-primary pupils)

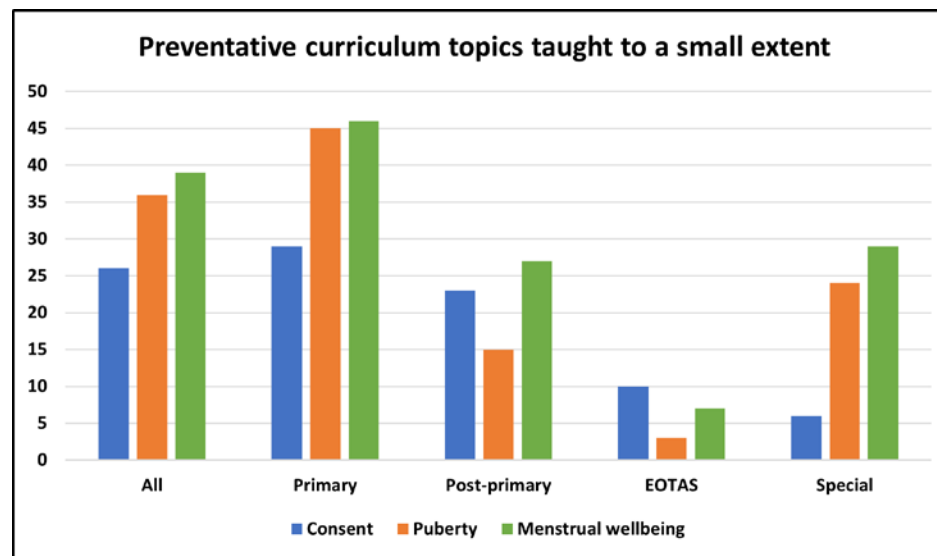
“I would like to learn about how girls turn into women, because there can be lots of problems about that. And teachers might think us girls are too young to think about that, but I’m actually going through that type of thing now and I want to know more about it”.

(Primary pupils)

In special schools, teachers report that the topic of consent can be challenging to explain, particularly to pupils who have severe learning difficulties or autism.

Almost one-half of primary schools (47%) and just over one-quarter (27%) of post-primary schools) teach menstrual wellbeing only to a small extent (**Figure 5.1**).

**Figure 5.1: Preventative curriculum topics taught to a small extent by phase.**



The written responses in the pupil questionnaires show that menstrual wellbeing is an area which pupils want to know more about:

“The school does not inform young girls about sex or periods. We have had to figure it out on our own because parents think the school will teach them this stuff”. (Post-primary pupil)

From the primary school visits, it is evident that pupils:

- are not provided with sufficient opportunities at an early enough stage to enhance their knowledge and understanding of menstrual wellbeing, and to discuss the implications;
- often learn about menstrual wellbeing in the final term of year 7 which is much too late for many pupils in terms of their development, but also too late for teachers to undertake any ongoing review or consolidation work; and
- in a small number of co-educational schools visited, pupils are separated by gender when the teaching of puberty takes place, which removes the opportunity for them to listen to and learn from the perspective of the other gender.

The separation by gender was also highlighted by post-primary pupils:

“The talk on positive body image was only given to the female portion of the school and the talk on gambling addictions was only given to the male portion. I feel like everyone could have benefitted from both talks equally.” (Post-primary pupil)

This is something schools should keep under review, to ensure that opportunities for further learning and follow-on discussion are not blocked, and potential negative stereotyping is avoided. The DE [‘Addressing Period Dignity in Schools’](#) pilot advocates inclusive education on periods and menstrual wellbeing in order to give all young people opportunities to understand this, and to challenge common misconceptions and related stigma.

The approach advocated by DE to the preventative curriculum is designed to provide schools/centres with the autonomy and flexibility to put in place a curriculum which best meets the needs of their pupils within the culture of the individual school/centre. The evidence from this evaluation shows that there is a downside to the flexibility and adaptability afforded by a non-statutory approach, in that too many schools/centres can avoid completely, or cover with insufficient depth and progression, many of the more sensitive aspects of the preventative curriculum.

Education needs to go beyond the title or topic which might be labelled as 'sensitive'. What is happening currently is that the issue becomes the contentious point. Instead of focusing holistically on how all of this is designed to help young people lead fulfilling lives and be safe and secure in the choices they make, it is covered in insufficient detail or not at all. The recent publication of the CCEA RSE progression framework should support schools/centres to deliver more effectively the minimum content and the more sensitive areas of RSE. It is incumbent on all schools/centres, with the involvement of governors, to monitor and evaluate the coherence and depth of coverage of all aspects of the preventative curriculum.

### Review and consultation on the preventative curriculum

- [Review of the preventative curriculum](#)
- [Consultation on the preventative curriculum: Pupils](#)
- [Consultation on the preventative curriculum: Parents/governors](#)

## Review of the preventative curriculum

The evidence from the visits confirms that schools/centres have been dealing with unprecedented circumstances as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The move to online approaches to learning and the associated lack of face-to-face teaching hampered the delivery of important aspects of the preventative curriculum; this has widened further the gaps in pupil knowledge, understanding and skills over the past two years. In the questionnaire responses, only one-quarter of schools/centres state that their preventative curriculum review process is flexible, timely and responsive to the needs of their pupils.

The evidence from the questionnaire returns and the school/centre visits shows clearly that too few schools/centres are responding in an agile manner to the contemporary issues which impact on their pupils, and this requires improvement. Since the return to face-to-face teaching, there has been an appropriate focus across all phases on reviewing pastoral policies and the delivery of the preventative curriculum.

"We refer to a responsive curriculum in school [so] as well as the planned preventative curriculum, we respond to situations as they arise" (Primary school)

"As we have a rolling admission sometimes 'review' is more frequent than each year as the curriculum responds to the needs of the pupils." (EOTAS centre)

In the schools/centres visited where a proactive, vibrant preventative curriculum was in place, the provision is characterised by:

- high quality progressive planning, which is current, flexible and responsive to the needs of the pupils;
- mapping and integrating the RSE curriculum across relevant subjects at each key stage;
- completing regular PD review audits to identify gaps in the preventative curriculum and the provision;
- good levels of pupil participation and engagement, which is subject to regular review and evaluation;
- well-informed, engaged and empowered pupils;
- high quality, innovative and engaging learning experiences for the pupils;
- an appropriate balance of in-school/centre and external provider delivered content, with good involvement of school/centre staff in planning and extending inputs from external agencies;
- good attention to the teacher professional learning needs of staff;

- confident leadership, at all levels, with a willingness to address sensitive issues with the best interest of pupils in mind; and
- good levels of involvement and oversight by well-informed governors.

## Examples of effective practice

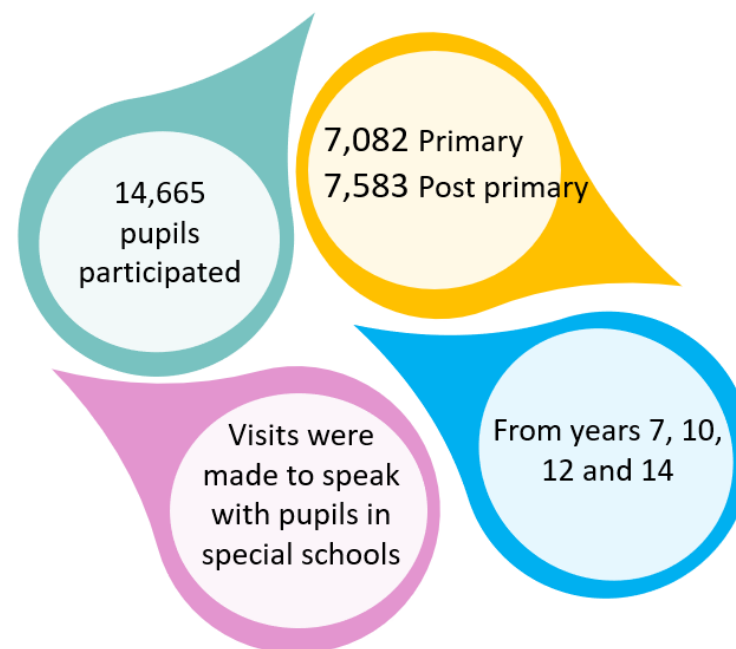
**In an EOTAS centre, staff are trained in a number of areas, including social work, psychology, youth and further education which has resulted in a multidisciplinary team developing a curriculum that is underpinned by trusting respectful relationships. The preventative curriculum addresses areas such as sexual exploitation, abortion and human trafficking. Current trends, statistics and legislation are provided to encourage pupil discussion and develop their critical thinking skills. The centre has developed a wide bank of resources to deliver RSE which are bespoke to the particular needs, context and experiences of the pupils.**

A post-primary school addressed misogynistic behaviour and language after male pupils explained how they heard hurtful language about females through the lyrics of music. An assembly was arranged, with sixth form pupils selecting music through which to explore the impact of language on the self-esteem of others. A small group of pupils who did not have a positive male role model were mentored by male staff on how to express feelings appropriately. A small number of pupils also accessed support from a Police Service of Northern Ireland education programme focussing on tackling misogyny.

- they are not being empowered to input to or even comment on these important aspects of their school work, and wider lives;
- they want, in their words “a normalisation” of the preventative curriculum which includes topics that are relevant to their lives; and
- they believe the preventative curriculum should provide them with sufficient knowledge and skills to help them understand and navigate the world they live in, and to stay healthy and safe.

## Consultation on the preventative curriculum: Pupils

A large number of pupils, both in the online questionnaire and during the focus group discussions, report their frustrations at not being consulted, or listened to, regarding the content, relevance and delivery of the preventative curriculum. It is of concern that just under one-half (49%) of the 14,665 pupils who responded to the online questionnaire felt that they had been asked their views on the content or impact of the preventative curriculum. The responses from the pupils indicates that:





Almost two-fifths (39%) of all schools/centres who responded to the online questionnaire indicated that they do not seek the views of pupils regarding the content of the preventative curriculum. Post-primary EOTAS centres have the highest rate of consultation with pupils (76%), while primary schools have the lowest (58%). In the more effective practice, pupils' views were used to inform and develop the preventative curriculum.

### **Examples of effective practice**

**In a post-primary school, pupils are encouraged to make suggestions about what to include within the preventative curriculum. Recent additions, as a result of the pupil suggestions, included drink-spiking and sexual harassment. Pupils also highlighted how the school established an LGBTQ+ group in full agreement with the Board of Governors.**

**A special school consulted with pupils to get their opinions on how to improve their experiences and safety in the local community area. The Department of Infrastructure worked with pupils to ascertain their views on how to improve a city council park so that it could be used safely and enjoyably by pupils with physical disabilities. A group of pupils also outlined to a local politician how the local traffic light system changed to red before all pupils could safely cross the road. Due to their input, the crossing was upgraded to a puffin crossing where the overall crossing time is established each time by on-crossing pedestrian detectors giving all pupils the time they need to cross safely. Pupils were able to see how their views and experiences influenced positive change.**

Approximately one-fifth of pupils who responded to the questionnaire expressed strong views about what should be included and improved.

“There should be a set curriculum that clearly outlines consent, includes LGBTQ+ people and does not shame sexual choices. It should be the same for every school.”

“Talk about problems that are recent and that can connect with young people of today...make them more relevant.”

“.....allow students to contribute more, by doing it cross-curricular in other subjects and by encouraging a more open and conversational manner.”

“Making sure any and all information is up-to-date and doesn't present certain issues, such as consent or respecting other sexual orientations as optional or as a debate to be had instead of basic human rights. Having someone well experienced, passionate, realistic, knowledgeable could also improve education regarding such things.”

(Post-primary pupils)

## Consultation on the preventative curriculum: Parents

Parents are an important stakeholder regarding the content and delivery of the preventative curriculum. They need to know what is being taught and when, so that they can support and talk with their children at home. It is clear, however, that there is further work to be done across all phases in consulting with parents/carers about their views on the preventative curriculum. Just under two-thirds (64%) of schools/centres seek the views of parents. Special schools have the highest consultation rate with parents (72%) and governors (86%).

ETI met with seven focus groups of parents across all phases to ascertain their views of the preventative curriculum and associated consultation process. Parents report that they:

- are well-informed about child-protection and safeguarding arrangements;
- agree with the emphasis on personal development and wellbeing;
- are fully supportive of the preventative curriculum;
- value highly the work of teachers and classroom assistants and the pastoral provision;

- would like to know more about the preventative curriculum, including the content being addressed and when it is taught; and
- want more opportunities to provide their views on the preventative curriculum and more specific information on how they can reinforce the messages at home to ensure the needs of their child(ren) are fully met.

The lack of regular and meaningful consultation with parents and pupils, alongside the lack of rigour in the governance of the preventative curriculum are significant issues, particularly given the high level of autonomy afforded to schools/centres to deliver an ethos-driven, flexible and adaptable preventative curriculum.

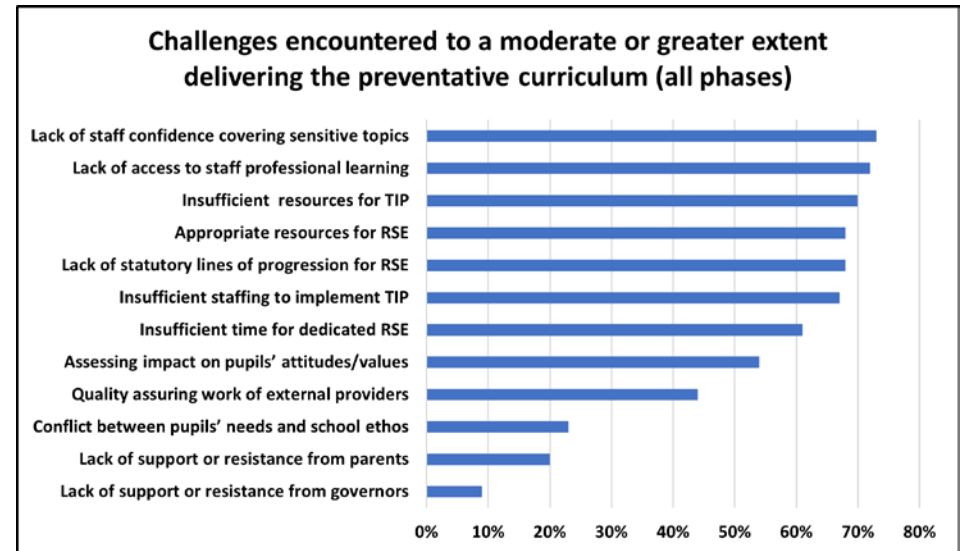
### Support for teachers to deliver the preventative curriculum

- [Teacher confidence and skillset](#)
- [Teacher professional learning](#)
- [External agency input](#)
- [CCEA and Education Authority resources](#)

## Teacher confidence and skillset

In response to the questionnaires, staff identified challenges in teaching the preventative curriculum (**Figure 6**) with a lack of staff confidence in delivering sensitive aspects as the biggest challenge (73%).

**Figure 6: Challenges which have been encountered to a moderate extent or greater when delivering the preventative curriculum across all phases (TIP – trauma informed practices).**



During the school/centre visits, teachers reported that they lack the knowledge, skills and confidence due to:

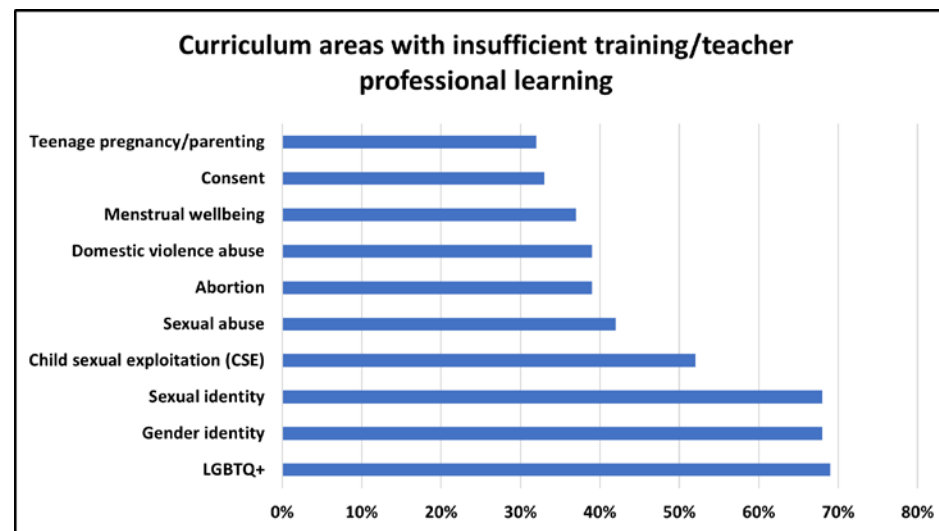
- insufficient specialist knowledge to engage confidently in discussions with the pupils on sensitive topics;
- a reticence around the facilitation of peer interaction and learning across some topics;
- the fear of parental objections;
- the challenges presented by a teacher's personal background, experiences and beliefs; and/or
- insufficient opportunities for continuing professional learning and development.

The extent, quality and impact of teacher professional learning for the preventative curriculum is not good enough. The teaching workforce feels ill-equipped to take forward the delivery of a progressive preventative curriculum, in an integrated and consistent way, to the level sought by pupils, and many parents. Teachers report that they have limited confidence and insufficient specialist knowledge and skills in the teaching of the more sensitive topics of the preventative curriculum.

## Teacher Professional Learning

A majority of respondents to the teacher questionnaire ranked the following as areas where they have received sufficient training: physical wellbeing (90%); emotional wellbeing (78%); healthy relationships (74%); and online digital safety (74%). These correlate with the areas that staff feel more confident in delivering within the preventative curriculum. In contrast, all phases report insufficient training in LGBTQ+ (69%), gender identity (68%), sexual identity (68%), CSE (52%), sexual abuse (42%), abortion (39%), domestic violence abuse (39%), menstrual wellbeing (37%), consent (33%), teenage pregnancy and parenting (32%) (**Figure 7**).

**Figure 7: Areas of the curriculum that schools and centres have insufficient training to support confident delivery.**



(Primary Schools are not included in the abortion column as that issue is not covered in the primary curriculum.)

During discussions and in the questionnaire responses, the pupils also identify that their teachers need to be better informed and more engaging when delivering these topics.

“The teachers could be more aware of what they are talking about because sometimes they are confused as well”.  
(Post-primary school)

Frustrations in accessing relevant training courses were documented in additional written school/centre responses.

“Designated Teacher and PDMU co-ordinators have tried for the past 4 years to enrol on an RSE course. Each time they applied within the first couple of days and were told that it was oversubscribed. Due to recent gender-related issues and the introduction of Period Dignity, this course will need to become more readily available. They were told that we would be given first priority for booking, but to no avail as yet.” (Primary school)

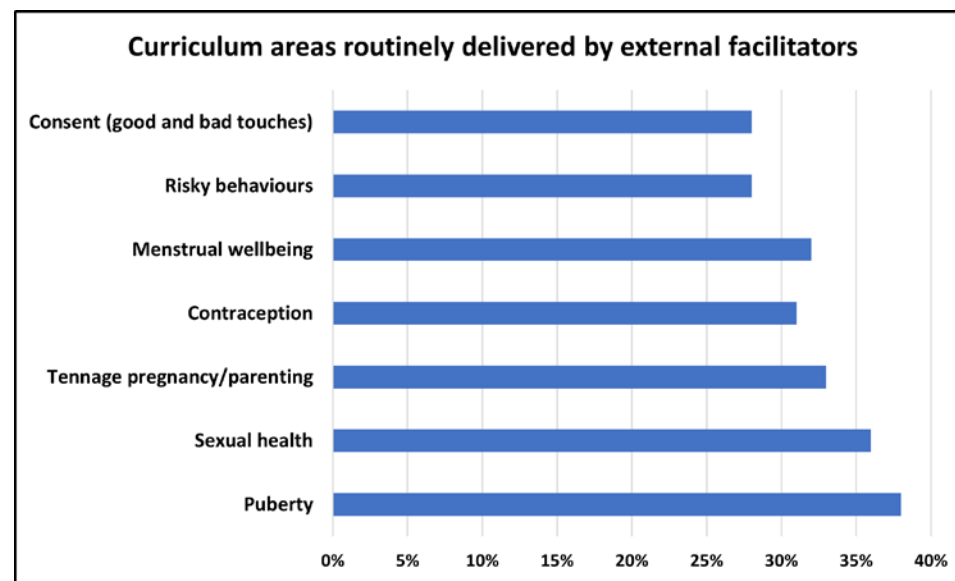
Given the current lack of emphasis on teacher professional learning for the preventative curriculum, it is not surprising that the evidence shows a significant lack of professional development in the teaching of many of the more sensitive aspects. In post-primary, for example, most teachers are trained and recruited as subject specialists in the first instance. They are not specialists in delivering the preventative curriculum and often undertake the role without the

substantive support and mentoring that is needed. A strategic investment in teacher professional learning, across all phases, with ongoing and regular professional updates and support, is required to equip them to take forward the ‘normalisation’ of the preventative curriculum desired by pupils.

## External agency input

The evidence shows that most schools/centres commission external providers to deliver some of the more sensitive aspects of the preventative curriculum (**Figure 8**). Senior and middle leaders report that this is to compensate for the lack of confidence of their own staff. While this is understandable, the approach does little to address and improve the levels of staff confidence and skills.

**Figure 8: Areas of the curriculum routinely delivered by external facilitators.**



The COVID-19 pandemic made it increasingly difficult for schools/centres to access external agency support in delivering aspects of the preventative curriculum. Just over one quarter of schools/centres (29%) report that they have not had access to adequate support from external agencies to deliver the preventative curriculum.

“It is an absolute nightmare trying to sort an outside agency to come into school to deliver RSE for P7 children...it is also costly. If it is part of the curriculum, teachers should be trained by DE and resources provided.” (Primary school)

Where external curriculum support has been accessed, features of effective practice include:

- a well-planned and evaluated programme which enhances the provision of the school/centre through specialist expertise;
- inputs from external agencies which are not viewed as one-off events;
- external agency work which is well-integrated into ongoing planning; and
- learning which is shared, consolidated and evaluated by school/centre staff and pupils to identify any perceived gaps and to inform future provision.

Of the 14,665 pupils who completed the online questionnaire, just under one-third (29%) of them indicated, as a first preference response, that they like to learn about the preventative curriculum through inputs from external agencies, with 54% finding talks from guest speakers around the preventative curriculum helpful. While pupils enjoy input from external agencies, they reported to inspectors that quite often aspects of the preventative curriculum delivered by external agencies/speakers were short, focused and standalone events or talks. Further, there is little in the way of consolidation and targeted follow-on work or discussion with school/centre staff which pupils would value.

“If someone needs help/advice they are going to need to speak to someone in the school (not a guest speaker).”

“More guest speakers who actually have had these experiences and know first-hand what happens or can explain what happened to them. They could give advice about what they did and how they recovered from a bad experience or how they improved the relationship.”

“Having more speakers in and presentations that are actually relevant to problems faced by people in the school, who are suffering unrecognisably e.g. sexual orientation/sexual identity.” (Post-primary pupils)

Special school staff emphasised that a significant degree of pre-planning is essential with external agencies if they are to understand and tailor sufficiently their delivery to the needs of the pupils. Due to the complexity of the pupils' needs, staff in special schools indicated that they often preferred to deliver the topics themselves.

"As a school which caters for young people who experience severe learning difficulties, outside agencies who can deal with their level of understanding and deliver support in an appropriate manner is limited. We therefore do this 'in house'." (Special school)

## CCEA and Education Authority Resources

In addition to support from external agencies, DE has provided funding for CCEA to develop and refine a wide range of up-to-date and relevant resources to support the delivery of the preventative curriculum, which are available on its RSE Hub and Wellbeing Hub. Despite the considerable investment in the development and publication of a wide range of largely relevant resources on the CCEA, RSE and Wellbeing Hubs, not enough schools/centres are aware of, or use them, to good effect. Notably, less than one-quarter (23%) of schools/centres use to a large or greater extent both CCEA's RSE and Wellbeing hubs. A minority of written comments highlighted that the resources were either not specific enough to their phase or were already outdated.

"Given the specific nature of our work, the resources/support is somewhat generic." (EOTAS centre)

"We have not received any training in RSE whatsoever. Having the time to review endless documents and reinvent the wheel constantly is extremely time consuming and impinges upon teaching time and adds additional stress to teachers." (Primary school)

More selective information. Who decided that these were the topics to be added to the hub? On what basis was this decision made?" (Post-primary school)

"Lack of resources for PMLD pupils and those pupils with lower cognitive ability. We are continually adapting and adding to our bank of resources as ability levels vary so much within each class." (Special school)

A number of schools/centres also reported the lack of age and stage appropriate Irish medium education resources and the lack of bespoke resources for pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) in special schools.

The same is true for DE's EHWB Framework, with only 35% of schools/centres reporting that they use it to a large or greater extent. The main reasons cited include: lack of staff awareness; insufficient time or knowledge to access/adapt the materials and plan learning activities; difficulties in navigating the website; and the variable quality of the resources.

“It [EHWB framework], wasn't disseminated to us. It was published during a period of school closure.” (Primary school)

System-wide, there has been no focus on high quality, regular professional learning opportunities to support the embedding of the available resources into planning and classroom practice and to further develop teachers' knowledge and pedagogical skills in delivering an effective preventative curriculum. Clearly there is work to be done in streamlining the resources to meet better the needs of teachers and reviewing further the suitability of the resources to meet the needs of all pupils.



## Conclusion

The design of the preventative curriculum aims to help our children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century. The policy approach has been to provide as much flexibility as possible to schools/centres in how they plan and deliver these aspects of the curriculum, in the context of their ethos. The outworking of this flexibility, however, also allows some schools/centres to avoid some of the more sensitive aspects of the curriculum. A more consistent quality of provision is required which is informed by the pupils' views on their curriculum and wider social experiences to better meet their needs.

ETI recognise that the curriculum in schools, particularly at key stage 4 in post-primary, is already an overly crowded space, and that schools/centres cannot provide a solution to all of society's problems. There is a risk, that some pupils in NI could leave school without a clear, unbiased knowledge and understanding of important concepts such as consent, healthy relationships, and gender identity. It is clear from the questionnaire responses that pupils want impartial information and education on these sensitive areas which is integrated and reinforced throughout the curriculum and a school/centre culture based on respect and personal responsibility.

Many of the key findings in this evaluation are not new, almost all of the issues have been identified and reported in previous ETI and other evaluations, but too many of them remain to be adequately addressed. There has not been sufficient and consistent consideration across the education system to tackle in a meaningful and timely manner the more sensitive, and for some, controversial issues. This report highlights key findings that need to be addressed, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that all children and young people, are equipped to keep themselves safe in line with the overarching aim of the NI Curriculum to 'empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives'.

## Appendix A: Terms of reference

The Department of Education commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to undertake a thematic evaluation of the delivery of an effective preventative and RSE curriculum in Schools and EOTAS centres. The purpose of the evaluation was to consider the key questions below.

- What actions/approaches have schools/centres put in place to effectively safeguard pupils?
- What are the key challenges facing schools/centres in effectively safeguarding pupils?
- What resources have been most helpful in supporting the development of these actions/approaches?
- What updates have schools/centres made to the preventative curriculum content over the last two years?
- What additional professional learning have staff accessed to deliver the preventative curriculum?
- What are the views of pupils of the safeguarding arrangements?

## Appendix B: Previous ETI evaluations

### Effective practice in RSE and preventative education

- Increased priority of RSE co-ordination by the leadership and PD programmes which focus on local issues;
- comprehensive development and implementation of appropriate policies, practices and procedures;
- an RSE/ PD programme which is appropriate to the needs and maturity of the pupils;
- the quality of the planning at Key Stage 3;
- the systematic approach to embedding important elements of the RSE programme across the primary curriculum; and
- the strong partnerships developed with external agencies to deliver RSE and the preventative curriculum.

### Less effective practice in RSE and preventative education

- The teaching of sensitive elements prior to transfer to post-primary;
- the gaps in provision, particularly at Key Stage 4 and beyond;
- the lack of consultation processes with parents and pupils to inform programme delivery;
- improving RSE training for teachers to build their capacity;
- the development of suitable RSE and preventative curriculum resources; and
- monitoring and evaluating processes which focus on the quality of teaching and learning in RSE and the preventative curriculum, and include the coherence of the pupils' experiences across all year groups to assure effective impact on their learning and PD.

## Appendix C: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

## Appendix D: Notes

- Page 3**     **509 responses\*** - There were a total of 361 questionnaires returned from primary schools and EOTAS centres: 356 from 796 (44.7%) of the primary sector, and five from six EOTAS centres (83%) of primary EOTAS centres. In addition, 148 responses were received from post-primary and special schools, and EOTAS centres: 107 from 192 (56.3%) of the post-primary sector, 29 from 39 (74.4%) of the special schools and 12 from 28 (43%) of post-primary EOTAS centres, including Exceptional Teaching Arrangements.
- Page 3**     **pupil questionnaire\*** - the term pupil in this report covers children in primary schools, special schools and pupils in post-primary schools and EOTAS centres.
- Page 4**     **nurturing approaches\*** - a nurturing approach within a school/centre recognises that positive relationships are central to individual pupils' learning and wellbeing, emphasising the balance between care and challenge/high expectations.
- Page 13**    **area learning community\*** - area learning communities provide a mechanism within which schools and other organisations come together to plan the curriculum they offer on an area basis.
- Page 18**    **non-cisgender identity\*** - non-cisgender describes people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.
- Page 19**    **19% of pupils\*** - only pupils in year 14 (1301) were asked whether LLW empowered them to make informed and responsible decisions.
- Page 20**    **Take Five\*** - Take Five at School is a resilience-building programme based on breathing, grounding and awareness.
- Page 21**    **DE funding\*** - the Engage Programme has benefitted children and young people, with more than £24 million provided to 1,700 educational settings this academic year. Engage has given schools/centres the flexibility to ensure that funding was used in a way that best supported pupils to reduce the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning and wellbeing. Similarly, the Healthy Happy Minds programme in primary schools has supported the emotional wellbeing of pupils, through the provision of therapeutic and counselling support services. In 2020 and 2021 £10 million pounds was made available to schools and EOTAS centres to support the emotional health and well-being of pupils and staff.

**LEGO-based therapy\*** - LEGO-based therapy is a social development program that uses LEGO activities to support the development of a wide range of social skills within a group of pupils.

**theraplay\*** - theraplay is an approach to child and family therapy that aims to address behavioural, emotional, or developmental issues and improve the parent-child relationship through play and healthy interaction.

**Page 25**

**pansexual\*** - Pansexual is romantic, sexual or emotional attraction towards people regardless of gender or sex identity.

## Appendix E: Schools/centres included in the evaluation visits

### Primary

Glencraig Integrated Primary School  
St Patrick's Primary School,  
Aughadarragh  
St Peter's Primary School, Cloughrea  
St Columba's Primary School, Kilrea  
Fane St Primary School  
Seaview Primary School  
Botanic Primary School  
Gibson Primary School  
Victoria Park Primary School  
Edwards PS Castlederg  
Queen Elizabeth II Primary School,  
Omagh  
Bush PS  
St Mary's Primary School Lisbuoy  
Rasharkin Primary School  
St John's Primary School, Bligh's Lane  
Lissan Primary School  
Dunclug Primary School  
St Patrick's Primary School, Saul  
Bridge Integrated Primary School  
Mary Queen of Peace Primary School  
Oakwood Integrated Primary School  
St Oliver Plunkett's Primary School  
St Joseph's Primary School, Duncloy  
Dundonald Primary School

### Special

Longstone School  
Mitchell House School  
Roddensvale School

### Post-primary

Ashfield Girls High School  
Bangor Academy and Sixth Form  
College  
St Patrick's College, Ballymena  
St Columbanus' College  
Sullivan Upper School  
St Pius X College  
North Coast Integrated College  
St Colm's High School, Draperstown  
Thornhill College  
Drumragh Integrated College  
St Mary's College, Irvinestown  
The Royal Belfast Academical  
Institution  
Edmund Rice College  
Our Lady of Lourdes High School,  
Ballymoney  
Glenlola Collegiate  
Strangford Integrated College Kilkeel  
High School  
St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh  
Clounagh Junior High School  
Bangor Grammar School

### EOTAS

Tamnamore EOTAS  
Strabane EOTAS  
Newstart EOTAS



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