

ANY

USE?

Young people's opinions on
Relationship and Sexuality
Education in Belfast

2019



Belfast
City Council



Belfast Youth Forum would like to thank our project partners:

COMMON
YOUTH.



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

CENTRE FOR
CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS

This project is part of World Children's Day celebrations
to mark the 30th anniversary of the UNCRC.



Because the best way to celebrate our rights is to assert them!

WHO we are

Belfast Youth Forum (BYF) is
the youth council for Belfast
City Council.

We're made up of **40 young people** from
communities **across Belfast** and all of our
members are aged between **13-18 years old**
(21 years old if disabled or have just left care).
We meet in Belfast City Hall twice a month
and it's our job to make sure that decision
makers within local and regional government
hear what young people have to say
about Belfast and the issues that shape
our lives.

We think government should
only make decisions and policies
for young people that promote,
uphold and protect our rights.

To try and make this happen, we organise
youth-led campaigns, events and
consultations with young people across
Belfast to raise awareness of rights
issues and influence change. We also
create research projects on issues such
as **hidden homelessness, shared
youth spaces, poverty** and **mental
health** based on listening to what young
people have to say. We share these views
with decision makers in government and
advocate for **rights-based youth
policies and services**.

Our 'Any Use?' research
project is our latest
youth-led campaign.

Belfast
**Youth
Forum**

WHY did we do this research?

Throughout 2017 and 2018, BYF held a number of youth consultations in Belfast including an event called 'Rights Here! Rights Now!' with the Lord Mayor in City Hall, which 120 young people attended.

GO!

4. Because RSE had been highlighted by young people as an issue, BYF decided to select it as one of our campaign areas.

Young people identified and explored rights issues in Belfast through youth-led workshops during these consultations.

DOWN YOU GO!

A theme that young people raised time and time again is the need for good quality Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

We think young people can provide important insights into RSE and are the best people to help inform and shape what RSE in schools looks like.

Young people's voices should be heard on this issue and our opinions taken seriously by decision makers working to improve RSE. We want our research to help make this happen.

MISS A TURN!

Young people spoke constantly about their current RSE not meeting their needs and wanting RSE provision to improve in schools.



OUR aims

We wanted our research to find out:

1. Young people's opinions on RSE in Belfast

2. How useful young people find their current RSE

We want to use the information we gather to ensure young people's voices are included in RSE policy decisions moving forward.

3. If young people understand their rights in relation to RSE



1.

It is recognised that **good quality RSE** gives young people the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to **negotiate safe and healthy sexual relationships**.¹

2.

With good quality RSE, young people are better able to understand and **uphold sexual rights** and **gender equality**, and take **responsibility** for their own and their partner's sexual health and well-being.²

3.

When it comes to RSE, **young people's voices and views are missing**. RSE is most often designed and implemented from an educator (adult) perspective and fails to explore what young people themselves understand about their rights and readiness for RSE, what they think is age-appropriate content, how they felt RSE should be delivered in schools and who should deliver it.³

4.

In a recent Department of Education consultation on RSE in England (2019), only **2%** of the 11,150+ respondents were young people.⁴

THE facts and figures

5.

As a result of young people being ignored in debates and consultations on RSE, **gaps occur** in the RSE they receive.⁵

7.

This runs the risk of RSE varying greatly in quality and content, being **irrelevant and not grounded in the reality** of young people's lived experiences.⁶

8.

It also leaves RSE open to being influenced by the religion and ethos of the school and therefore increases the risk of RSE being **biased and non-factual**.

6.

In NI, while the Department of Education provides guidance to primary and secondary level schools, schools **are free to develop their own policy** on how they address RSE within the curriculum.

RSE: It's a children's rights issue!

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says:

'Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality health care... and education on health and wellbeing so that children can stay healthy.'

The right to sexual and reproductive health is an integral part of the right to health and a particular focus in the UNCRC General Comment No. 20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence (CRC/GC/20), which states...

'All adolescents should have access to free, confidential, adolescent-responsive and non-discriminatory sexual and reproductive health services, information and education.' (X159)

The Department of Education and the Department of Health have a responsibility to ensure young people have RSE provision that upholds this right. Local councils like Belfast City Council, with their Community Planning powers, also have an important role to play in working with government partners to help create rights-based RSE provision for young people.



HOW did we do our research?

Like all Belfast Youth Forum projects, our RSE report is a piece of work done by young people for young people.

We asked Queen's University Centre for Children's Rights to support our research project because they are experts at working with young researchers, and they use child rights-based methods and processes when working with young people on research projects.

The QUB Centre for Children's Rights helped us to:

- Develop our online survey;
- Gain ethical approval for our research;
- Collect surveys from young people;
- Analyse our findings;
- Create our research report.



CENTRE FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

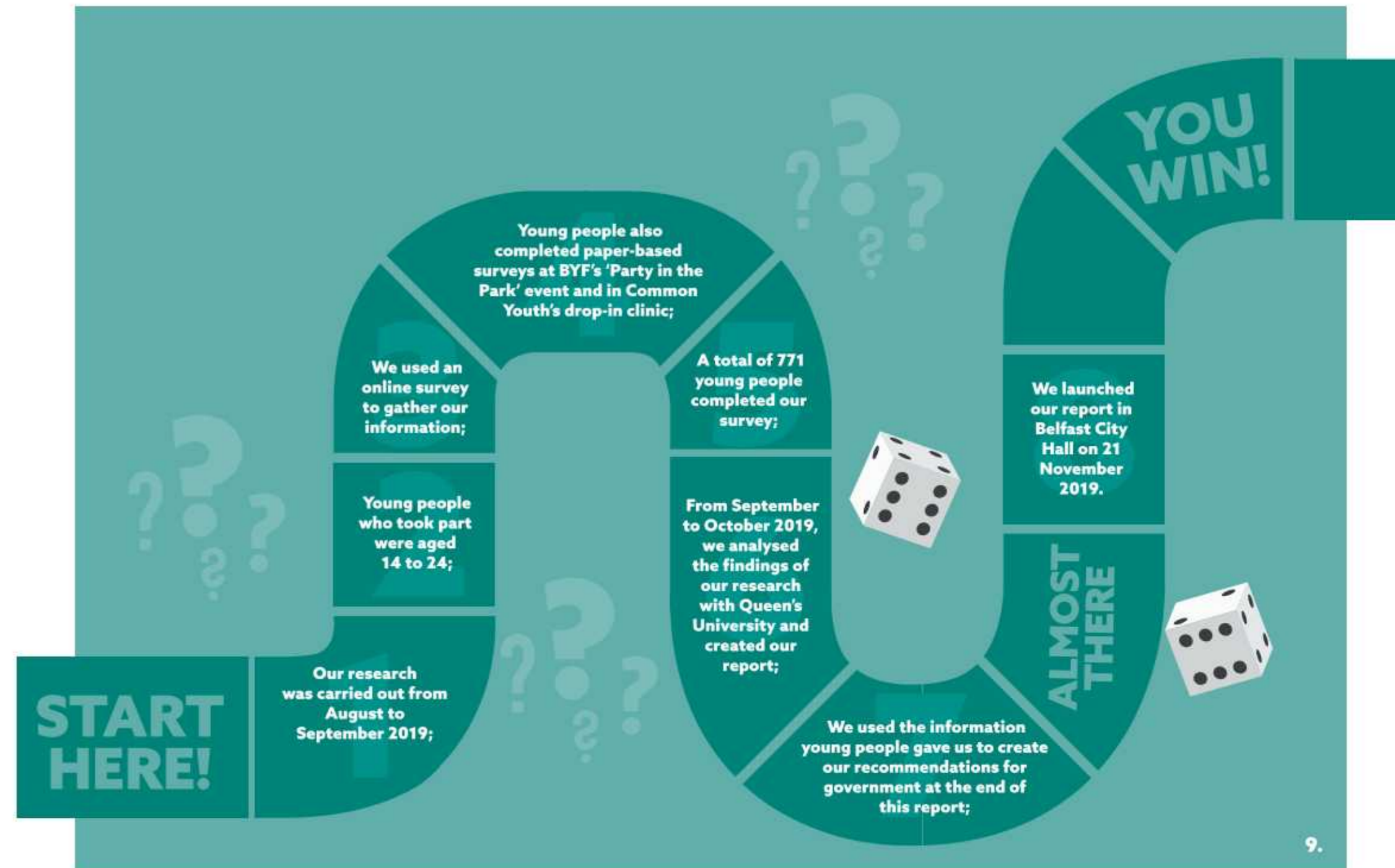
COMMON YOUTH.

We also asked Common Youth to work with us because they are experts at working with young people to explore relationships, sexual health and sexuality.

Common Youth helped us to:

- Understand current RSE policy and provision;
- Design our survey questions;
- Collect surveys from young people.

We knew that working with Queen's University and Common Youth would help make our work more credible and would produce a stronger report.



WHO took part ?

771 young people took part in our survey

67% of participants were female

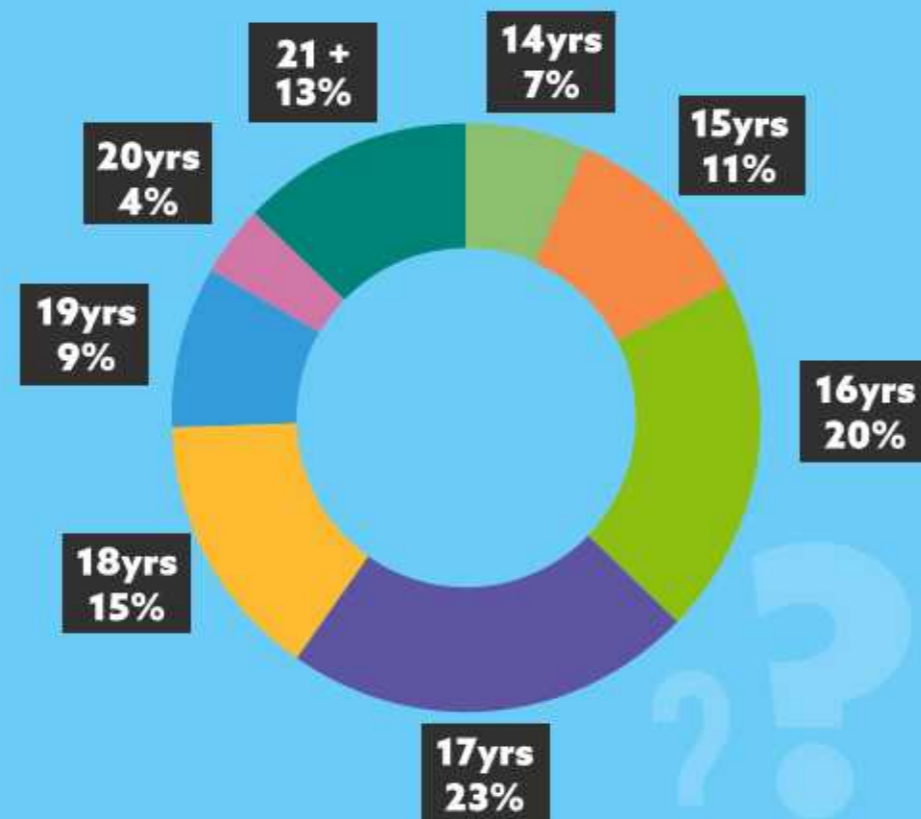
31% percent were male

2% identified as neither male nor female

79% lived in Belfast

70% attended a school in Belfast

Age breakdown of participants in survey



OUR findings

A RIGHT TO RECEIVE RSE

We asked young people if they had a right to receive RSE in school and whether or not they thought this right was being met.

23%

Only 23% felt that adults trusted young people to make their own choices about relationships and sex.

+56%

The proportion of 14-16 year olds saying their right was met (56%) was significantly higher than the proportion of those 17 or over saying this (43%).

72%

72% of young people who took part in the survey said they knew they had a right to receive RSE in school.

52% of young people said they felt their right to RSE was not being met.

52%

58% felt that adults did not trust them and one in five (20%) said they did not know if adults trusted them in this regard.

1 in 5

HOW do young people describe their RSE?

We asked young people to tell us three words that best described the RSE they received in school.

Overall, negative word associations dominated young people's answers. The four most commonly used negative word associations were:

'Basic'

'Unhelpful'

'Useless'

'Biased'

Other frequently used negative associations were:

'limited' **'vague'** **'uninformative'** and

'heteronormative'.

LEARNING

about sex and relationships

The three most popular sources from which young people said they learn about relationships and sex were:

- 1. Friends and peers (62%)**
- 2. Social media (55%)**
- 3. Lessons in school (54%)**

Boys were much more likely than girls to use **the internet** as a source of information. In fact, for boys this was the **main source** of information.

For girls, however, **friends and peer groups** were most common followed by **social media**.

From which of the following do you learn about sex and relationships?

Source	Females	Males	All
Friends or peer group	64	58	62
Social media	58	50	55
Lessons at school	55	54	54
Internet	51	61	54
Mother	52	25	44
TV and films	39	41	39
Boyfriend or girlfriend	31	31	31
Youth group	23	19	21
Magazines, papers, books, posters	19	13	17
Father	10	25	15
Family planning clinic, Brook or Common Youth	15	6	13
Brother or sister	12	9	11
Doctor	10	10	10
School nurse	8	6	8
Radio	6	7	6
Guardian	4	4	4
Telephone helplines	*	*	<1
None of these	*	*	1
Don't know	1	4	2
All of these sources	<1	3	1

(multiple responses were permitted)

RSE in school

Young people were asked a range of questions about RSE in schools.

The vast majority of young people (**86%**) felt that **school was the best place** to receive RSE.

Yet only **66%** of respondents said they had actually received RSE in school.

55% of young people first received RSE in school when they were between 11 and 13 years of age.

One third (**32%**) said they did not receive RSE until they were between 14 and 16 years of age.

Only **10%** of young people had received RSE before they were 11 years of age, for example, in **primary school**.

This may help explain why **more** 14 to 16 year olds said they knew they had a **right** to RSE than young people over the age of 16 did.

14 to 16 year olds (**71%**) were more likely to say that they had **received RSE** in school than those aged 17 years or over (**63%**).

HOW useful is RSE in school?

We asked young people to rate how useful their RSE in school was.

60%
60% of young people felt that the information they received was either 'not very useful' or 'not useful at all'.

10%
Only 10% said that they thought the information they received in RSE was 'very useful'.

73%
73% of young people said they only received RSE 'once or twice' or 'rarely'.

30%
30% felt it was 'useful'.

5%
Only 5% reported that they had received RSE 'often'.

10%
The **later** young people first received information about relationships and sex, the **less useful** they find this information.

60%
60% of those who first received RSE at 16+ found the information wasn't useful. This compares with just **21%** who first received information about relationships and sex when they were 8 to 10 years old.

WHAT subjects was RSE taught in school?

RSE was most likely to be covered in **Biology** or **Science** classes.

In what subjects was RSE taught in school?



(multiple response table)

- Nearly half (49%) of young people felt that the way RSE was taught was influenced by **religion** or the **ethos** of the school they attended.
- However, **nearly three quarters** of young people felt that RSE **should not** be influenced by the school's **religion** or **ethos**.
- Only 12%** felt that it should be.

We asked young people how they felt RSE should be delivered in schools and who should deliver it.

- The overwhelming majority of young people (**77%**) thought a **taught course** as part of an existing subject or a **special RSE curriculum programme** was the best way to deliver RSE.
- Only **7%** of young people thought RSE should be delivered through **one-off 'talks'** in school.
- This finding is particularly stark given **73%** of young people told us they have only received RSE in school '**once or twice**' or '**rarely**'.

How should RSE best be taught?



By far the most commonly given response in relation to who should teach RSE was 'a qualified RSE teacher'.

Who should deliver RSE to young people?



An overwhelming majority felt that **young people** should have an **influence** in how RSE is taught.

What influence should young people have in the delivery of RSE?



(multiple response table)

AT WHAT AGE?

Over half of respondents felt that young people should start to be taught about **personal and sexual relationships** when they are between 11 and 13 years of age.

Age at which respondents felt young people should start to be taught about personal and sexual relationships (%)

Age	Personal relationships	Sexual relationships
5-7	13	2
8-10	18	10
11-13	52	52
14-16	14	30
16+	3	5

WHAT should be taught to young people in RSE?

The most popular subject young people wanted to learn about was **personal relationships** (66%)

Of the **top 10** most popular subjects young people wanted to learn about in RSE, six of these related to **personal relationships**.

Given the majority of young people in our survey told us they receive RSE in **biology** or **science classes**, it is unclear how young people's self-identified desire to explore and learn about **personal relationships** is currently being met in schools.

The next most popular subjects for young people were:

Sexual intercourse (64%)

The prevention of STIs (62%)

Personal relationships, sexual intercourse and STI prevention were chosen subjects by more than six out of ten young people.

43% of young people said that all the subject areas listed should be included in RSE.

What should be taught to young people in RSE (%)?

Personal relationships	66
Sexual intercourse	64
Prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), eg, Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea, Syphilis and HIV/AIDS	62
LGBT relationships	59
Love and respect	58
Differences between healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships	58
Pregnancy	58
Contraception	57
Issues around giving or obtaining sexual consent	55
Domestic Violence	53
Different family types like two parent families, single parent families, same sex parent families etc.	52
Menstruation (periods)	50
Abortion	50
Issues experienced by the opposite sex	46
Different opinions openly discussed, even if they do not agree with the teacher's or school's point of view	44
Masturbation & erections	42
Marriage	42
Gender identity	40
Orgasm	35
Wet dreams	28
All of the above	43

WHAT does all this mean?

1. The vast majority of the young people surveyed were aware they had a right to RSE but many agreed that this right **was not being met**.

2. While **66%** of the respondents had received some RSE at school, the frequency, content and delivery of this was deemed **'Basic'; 'Unhelpful'; 'Useless' and 'Biased'**.

3. Only 10% said that the information they received was **'very useful'**.

4. Our young people's current experience of receiving RSE **'rarely'** (73%) and **'while in biology or science class'**, and mostly **'influenced by the school religion or ethos'**, is not good enough and is not helping our young people to make healthy and safe decisions as they transition to intimate relationships.

5. It is also evident that the **later** young people receive RSE, the **less useful** it is to them.

6. As a result, young people reported that they resort to **friends** (62%) and **social media** (55%) for the information they need to know, and **the internet** was the main source of information for boys.

7. This risks exposing young people to **misinformation, myths, misconceptions** and **inaccuracies** about sexual health and relationships.

8. Despite their critique of current RSE provision in school, an overwhelming amount of young people felt that **school** was the best place to receive RSE (86%)

9. But it should be delivered during a more **in-depth** taught course (77%), and by a **qualified RSE teacher**.

10. To address issues, concerns or questions young people may have that are not being met by current RSE provision, **86%** felt that **young people voices** should be **included**.

11. In this way, they can help inform on **content, design and delivery** of RSE thus making it more **relevant** and **useful** to their actual needs.

12. Interestingly, the most popular issue young people wanted to learn about during RSE was how to negotiate **personal relationships** (66%), and the majority thought that **age 11** is a good time to start RSE.

OUR recommendations

We want our government and policy makers to:

1. Adopt a rights-based and proactive approach to RSE

We want a **rights-based, proactive** and **positive** approach to relationship and sexuality education.

This approach should be based on the **public health, education** and **support** needs of our young people. It should help young people understand **sexual rights, sexuality and sexual behaviours** and how these impact on their, and others, health and wellbeing.

We think this should be done using a multi-sectoral approach where **decision makers, policy makers, educationalists** and **service providers** work together.

We want to see an end to **reactive approaches** to RSE that may come too late and focus on **treatment** as opposed to **prevention** to a move towards a proactive approach that focuses on eliminating problems before they appear.

2. Co-produce a curriculum programme and relevant interventions with young people

Work with young people to develop age-appropriate, relevant and inclusive RSE programme for schools. This should be a mandatory part of the school curriculum.

As part of this work, current RSE content should be broadened to include issues around:

- **Personal relationships;**
- **Sexual rights and behaviours;**
- **Gender equality and diversity;**
- **Responsible parenthood;**
- **Violence prevention;**
- **Preventing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.**

Policy makers and service providers should also work in collaboration with young people to review the nature and extent of barriers they face in accessing RSE and sexual health services, and **co-produce** RSE interventions with young people to enhance **relevance** and **applicability** of this to the reality of their lives.

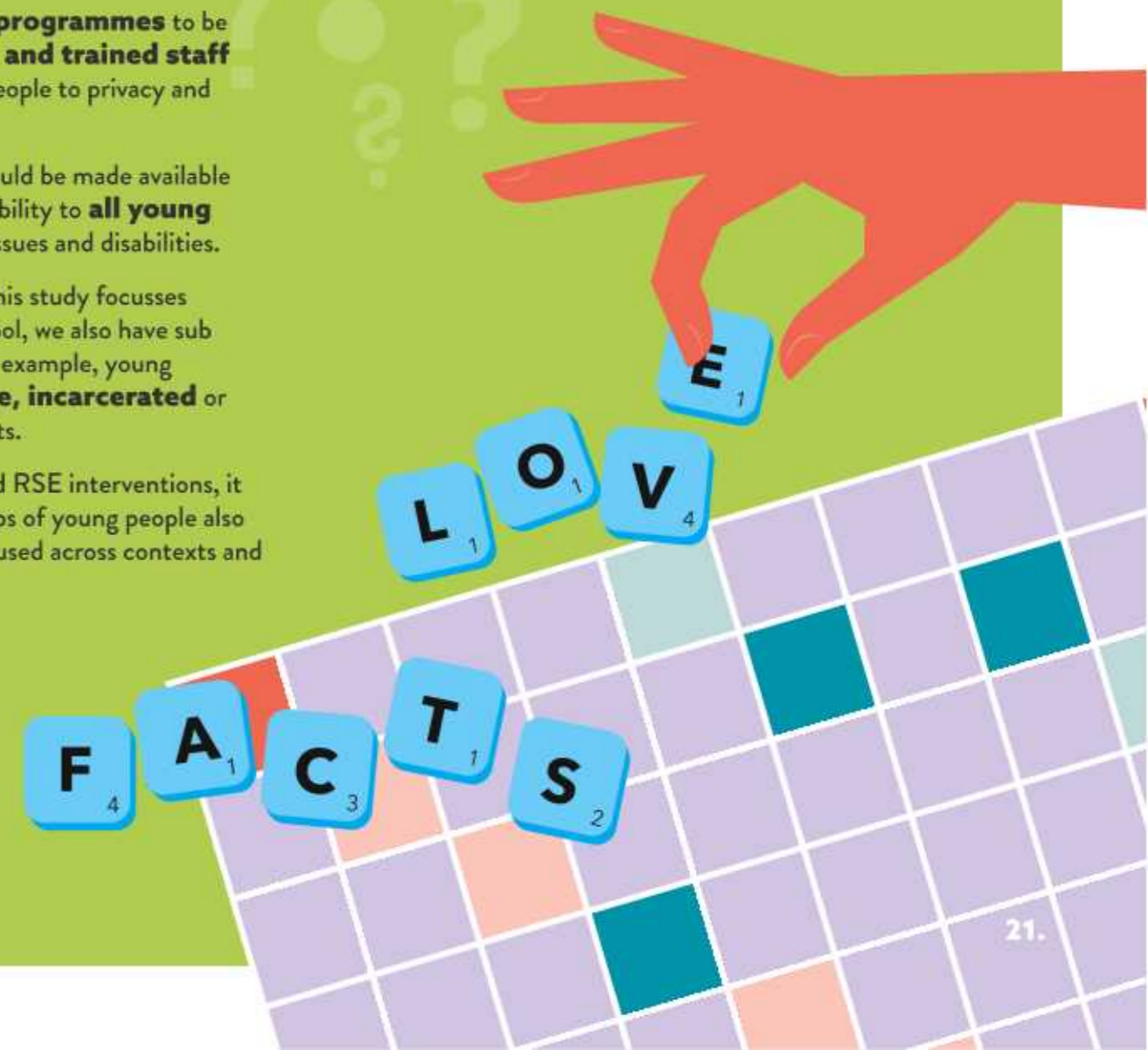
3. Specialist staff to deliver RSE

We want **co-produced education programmes** to be delivered by **specialised, qualified and trained staff** who fully respect the rights of young people to privacy and non-discrimination.

RSE information and interventions should be made available in alternative formats to ensure accessibility to **all young people** including those with literacy issues and disabilities.

It is also important to note that while this study focusses on young people and RSE while at school, we also have sub groups of youth who may miss this, for example, young people **excluded** from school, **in care, incarcerated** or **withdrawn from classes** by parents.

Therefore, when designing co-produced RSE interventions, it is important to engage with these groups of young people also and produce interventions that can be used across contexts and **not just in schools.**



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5. Sex Education Forum, 2016.
6. Rasmussen, 2010, Templeton et al., 2017.

THANK you!

We want to say a big thank you to all the young people who took part in our research, without your help none of this would have been possible.

JOIN our campaign!

Tweet, Facebook and Instagram your messages about Relationship and Sexuality Education in Belfast. Help us to challenge the stereotypes, influence decision makers and get people talking!



Remember to include our hashtag #AnyUse

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