

# Scottish Catholic Education Service submission of 12 April 2023

## PE1991/J: Develop an educational resource on abortion

Thank you for your email of the 8<sup>th</sup> March, seeking a response to this petition. The response below is provided by the Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES) which is the advisory office on education matters to the Roman Catholic Bishops of Scotland.

### **The petitioner's complaint**

This petition is based on 3 aspects 1) stigma related to abortion 2) funding is needed to create resources to overcome this stigma 3) there is currently a breach of the UNCRC.

SCES would disagree with the petitioner and note that there are educational resources, there is no breach of the UNCRC and there is no evidence of stigma relating to abortion – noting in particular that schools work tirelessly to protect the confidentiality and privacy of pupils and to combat prejudice, stigma, intolerance and bullying relating to all aspects of pupils' lives.

Our initial response is therefore to question the competence of this petition, in terms of detail and necessity.

### **Stigma - Evidence of impact of current work for young people:**

According to the most recent report of [public health Scotland](#)

*“The teenage pregnancy rate in Scotland is at its lowest level since reporting began in 1994. Pg4*

*“The proportion of teenage pregnancies that result in a termination is increasing. In 2018 the percentage of teenage pregnancies that ended in termination was the highest since reporting began (46%).” Pg 4*

*“...the under 18 age group saw termination rates rise above delivery rates in 2018 for the first time since reporting began in 1994. Meanwhile, termination rates for under 16s have remained higher than delivery rates since 2002. Therefore, in 2018, teenage women in the younger (under 16 and under 18) age groups were more likely to have a termination than a delivery while older*

*teenagers were more likely to have a delivery than a termination.*

*Pg 6*

This evidence would suggest that young people are knowledgeable, have understanding and able to make decisions to access abortion services. It also challenges the assumption that there is a stigma relating to abortion. Further detail within this report also notes the high proportion of young people accessing termination services before 9 weeks, indicating not only that young people have confidence to access these services, but perhaps also inferring that others, including the school and peers, may not even be aware that the service has been accessed.

**Resources and prioritisation of funding** – The Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee published the report [“Lets talk about personal and social education”](#) in 2017. This work included educators and learners and concluded with a number of recommendations. In 2018 Education Scotland published the report on the [thematic inspection for PSE/HWB](#), and in 2019 Scottish Government concluded work with the [Review of Personal and Social Education Preparing Scotland’s Children and Young People for learning, work and life](#). None of this work concluded that a priority for pupils, teachers or education partners was learning and teaching on abortion.

There are no mandated resources within Scotland and teachers source and use texts and content as needed to meet the educational purpose of their planned lessons. However, The Scottish Government have funded and supported the national resource for RSHP, available to all schools that hosts learning and teaching materials on abortion. In addition, there are numerous educational resources available through the NHS and commercial text books that schools can and do access relating to abortion. We note that the [RSHP statutory guidance](#) reiterates the Scottish Government supports the right of the Catholic Church:

*“to give witness to its faith, and to uphold the traditions of Catholic education.”*

**Beyond the classroom:** Curriculum is defined, in Scotland, as the totality of all that is planned for children and young people from early learning and childcare, through school and beyond. This means that learning does not just happen within formal classroom environments. This is perhaps best seen in the experience of pastoral care within a secondary school. Young people are supported and accompanied through different challenges and opportunities that they encounter with

individualised support and care planning. While this may be categorised as the 'informal' curriculum, the outcome or impact of these pastoral relationships and moments of teaching are vital for pupils, in particular relating to aspects of health and wellbeing. The skill of the pastoral care teacher is often in knowing when it is appropriate to accompany a pupil themselves or to work in partnership with another expert agency, such as the NHS, social work or community youth teams. We would conclude that the close partnership between schools and the wider school community serves young people well in ensuring they have access to qualified expertise relating to their health, social, physical, spiritual and mental wellbeing.

**Breach of UNCRC** - SCES is concerned that the UNCRC is being misused in order to further political and personal agendas. Abbreviated versions of articles 3 and 17 are cited as an evidence base as to why this petition should be actioned.

This petition reduces article 3, which has three important clauses to one line. This article is primarily about duty of care when decisions or actions are made on behalf of children. While education can be included in this holistic understanding of what is meant by decisions or actions, the entire article is actually focused on that state responsibility, in cooperation with parents and carers, for protection and care of children for such things as their safety, housing, well being and care.

Article 17 is also misappropriated as evidence to support this petition. This article is specifically entitled "misinformation from the media". It relates to ensuring that state governments do not limit the media. To suggest that this article is evidence in support of this petition is to misuse the intention of the UNCRC broadly and this article specifically.

**Broader Context - Pregnancy and Parenthood while you are at school:** The recent publication from Scottish Government to support young people who will become parents while in school, [published on the 6<sup>th</sup> March](#), is the result of consultation and collaboration across the education sector, including the young people themselves. This work recognises what has been described above – schools are not the sole provider of education and learning, but work in partnership with other experts at particular times. This work is also, in part, a response to the fact that there has been a stigma related to becoming a parent at a young age, and that prejudice, discrimination and barriers to education are often a result of the decision to have a child.

We cite this work to note and recognise the wider work in Scotland regarding pre natal and neo natal care, as well as the conversation emerging in Scotland in relation to acknowledging the loss and bereavement linked to miscarriage and still births. This is a very complex and sensitive area. Attempting to compartmentalise it or parachuting in resources without context to schools is neither a purposeful educational approach nor of benefit to the young people in our care.

I hope that this reply assists the Committee in its work.