Relationships and Sex Education in Jewish schools

Explorative and participatory research on experiences of Relationships and Sex Education in Jewish secondary schools

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Executive summary

Relationships and Sex Education is about equipping young people with the knowledge and tools to help them navigate emotional, social and physical aspects of human relationships. As of 2020, all schools in England, including faith-based schools, are mandated to deliver Relationships and Sex Education (RSE).

This report examines the delivery and reception of Relationships and Sex Education in Jewish secondary schools in the UK. The research, commissioned by Jewish AIDS Trust (JAT) and conducted by Social Finance and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR), aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of RSE experiences among students in Jewish secondary school settings.

This report's findings aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about RSE in faith-based educational settings and inform future policy and practice in Jewish schools across the UK.

Methodology

The research adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection with secondary research. Research was carried out in four Jewish secondary schools outside the strictly orthodox sector schools in England.

Qualitative research with school staff included 8 semi-structured interviews with school staff. This includes PSHE/RSE Leads, Rabbis, and teachers. Qualitative research with pupils consisted of 6 focus groups with 28 Year 10 and 11 pupils in two schools, using participatory research techniques.

Quantitative methods included a pupil survey of 571 pupils, from Years 10 and 11 across three schools.

Key findings

Young people's views on RSE

- Overall, young people participating in this research feel more positive than negative about the quality of their RSE.
- There is significant variation in both the quality and coverage of topics within RSE, with some subjects, such as sexual consent and sexting, being taught more consistently than others.
- LGBTQ+ pupils in Jewish schools feel that RSE related to their experiences could be improved.
- Students highlighted the limited specialist knowledge and lack of enthusiasm of some RSE teachers.
- Young people emphasised the value of a comfortable learning environment that encourages open discussion, supported by positive and strong pupil-teacher relationships.
- Young people describe wanting to learn more about several areas: 'Normal' and healthy relationships, dealing with conflict and arguments, STIs and safer sex, and sexual harassment prevention and response.
- Survey results show that fewer girls than boys feel comfortable asking questions in RSE classes.

Relationships and Sex Education as a rapidly evolving subject

- Due to the rapid expansion of the digital landscape, students source information and guidance about relationships and sex from a wide range of sources, often turning to peers and social media for information.
- High expectations are placed on teachers to keep up with the evolution of topics, despite varying levels of confidence teaching certain topics.
- Schools vary in their approach to RSE teacher training, with some providing structured support and others offering minimal preparation time.

Model of delivery

- Three of the four schools deliver RSE through a dedicated team of RSE teachers and hold classes fortnightly.
- The extent to which schools prioritised RSE varied, influencing the way it was delivered
- There was little to no active engagement in RSE from parents, across all schools.

School staff experiences

- Staff highlighted several challenges with delivering RSE, including identifying teachers for RSE, lack of preparation time, potential discomfort with certain topics, and insufficient subject specific training.
- Staff mentioned some enablers for supporting effective delivery of RSE, including classroom management, being open about personal experiences and opinions, and providing an informal setting in classes.

Impact of Jewish ethos

- Two of the four schools treated RSE as separate to the Jewish ethos of the school, whilst the other two schools viewed RSE to be intrinsically connected to the Jewish values of the school.
- Research indicates a link between the qualities and interests of teachers who teach RSE and those who teach Jewish Studies. Some teachers noted that their background in delivering informal Jewish education has supported their RSE teaching skills.

- Jewish organisations have provided valuable support and advice on appropriate and culturally sensitive delivery of RSE.
- In some schools, areas of complexity were identified when aligning Orthodox Jewish values with LGBTQ+ inclusion in RSE and some sexual health elements of the RSE curriculum.
- LGBTQ+ pupils may have different experiences of RSE compared to their peers. Some may be experiencing isolation, compounded by feeling part of a minority already.

Based on these findings, we have developed a series of recommendations to support Jewish schools in enhancing their RSE provision and addressing the identified challenges, included at the end of this report.

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

In the UK, Relationships and Sex Education is widely recognised as essential for supporting young people's healthy development in a complex digital world.

RSE is considered crucial to fostering wellbeing, developing resilience, and challenging misogynistic and harmful gender-based beliefs and norms at the root of sexual violence and domestic abuse. It forms part of the UK Government Strategy for Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls and the revised Department of Education's 'Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024', as schools and colleges "play a crucial role in preventative education" (Department for Education, 2024). In addition, Baroness Bertin's recent Independent Review on Pornography highlighted the need for tighter oversight of the RSHE statutory guidance and further support and training for teachers (UK Gov, 2025).

Since 2020, Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) has become compulsory in secondary schools in England. The statutory guidance aims to "enable schools to promote the spiritual, moral, social, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils, at school and in society". The guidance also stipulates that schools with a religious character "may teach the distinctive faith perspective on relationships…[and] may wish to reflect on faith teachings about certain topics as well as how their faith institutions may support people in matters of relationships and sex". Ultimately, "schools are free to determine how to deliver the content".

In light of the statutory requirements and autonomy granted to all schools, including faith-based schools, to determine how RSE is delivered, Social Finance and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) have been commissioned by Jewish AIDS Trust (JAT) to explore how RSE is being delivered and received by pupils at Jewish schools.

This research aims to gather an understanding of how children attending Jewish secondary schools are experiencing RSE, in order to identify gaps and opportunities to improve the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of young people in Jewish schools. The insights gathered will be valuable in shaping and enhancing Relationships and Sex Education in a context to better serve the needs of students in Jewish educational settings.

1.2 The partnership

This project was commissioned by Jewish AIDS Trust (JAT) and brings together the expertise of Social Finance and The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR).

Jewish AIDS Trust (JAT) is a London-based charity who provide support and counselling for Jewish people living with HIV, as well as promoting education and awareness of sexual health issues in and outside the Jewish community.

JAT commissioned the work, provided strategic direction and supported with the recruitment of participating schools.

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation that specialises in contemporary Jewish issues and is responsible for much of the data and analysis that exist on Jews in the UK and across Europe. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities by conducting research, promoting informed debate and developing policy in partnership with those best placed to influence Jewish life.

JPR led the survey design and analysis for schools and teachers and led recruitment of participating schools.

Social Finance is a not-for-profit organisation that works with our partners to research, design, and scale solutions to complex and enduring social issues. Our human-centred design and research team work with local and national governments, commissioners and service providers to gather actionable insights from those with lived experience to improve public services and the lives of people and communities.

Social Finance led the qualitative research with young people and school staff and overarching management of the project.

1.3 Previous literature

Since becoming statutory, there has been increasing research carried out on RSE in England, offering insights for example into the role of RSE, its effectiveness, best practice, current

delivery and pupil experience across the country.

- Role and effectiveness of RSE: The DfE's publication 'Teaching Relationships Education to Prevent Sexual Abuse' highlights the preventative role that RSE can play in reducing abuse and exploitation[1]. It emphasises the value of pedagogies that promote consent, privacy, and interpersonal skills.
- Best practice: Insights from Formby and Donovan argue that effective RSE should emphasise healthy relationships rather than focus narrowly on the mechanics of sexual acts[2] . Another study underscores the importance of smaller group settings, which create safer spaces for students to engage in meaningful dialogue[3] . Meanwhile, evidence suggests that early education on appropriate and inappropriate touching can increase children's awareness without heightening anxiety, reinforcing the importance of age-appropriate and scaffolded teaching strategies[4] .

[1] Department for Education (2024). Teaching Relationships Education to Prevent Sexual Abuse. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-relationships-education-to-prevent-sexual-abuse
[2] Formby, E. & Donovan, C. (2020). *Rethinking Relationships and sex education: A Critical Analysis*.
[3] Jørgensen, C., et al. (2019). *Creating Safe Spaces for RSE Discussions in Schools*.

[4] Finkelhor, D., et al. (2021). *Early Education on Appropriate and Inappropriate Touching: Impacts and Outcomes*.

- Current delivery: The SafeLives report, "I Love It - But Wish It Were Taken More Seriously", highlights inconsistencies in RSE delivery across English secondary schools[5]. The report identifies a tendency for RSE to be deprioritised, with students and educators perceiving it as less important than core subjects. Students expressed frustration with content that failed to address real-life experiences, particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ identities and discussions about pleasure, intimacy, and healthy relationships.
- Data on pupil experience: The Sex Education Forum conducts an annual Young People's Poll aimed at capturing young people's views and experiences on their RSE. In 2024, The Sex Education Forum carried out a survey of 16- and 17-year-olds in nine regions of England that received 1,001 survey responses. This report will use this data as a comparison set.

Despite the growing body of literature relating to RSE, a gap remains in research exploring RSE in the context of Jewish educational settings. Given the distinct cultural and religious values and frameworks within which Jewish schools operate, the way in which this intersects with RSE is likely to be unique and context specific. This report aims to make a contribution towards closing this research gap by building on existing research and insights and complementing it with targeted research within Jewish schools.

1.4 Jewish education

To situate previous research on RSE and the findings from this study within their context, it is important to understand the landscape of Jewish schools in England and the significance of the Jewish ethos of different schools.

One of the most notable trends in the contemporary British Jewish community has been the dramatic expansion of Jewish day schools, in both the proportion and absolute size of the population of Jewish young people who attend them.[6] Since the mid-1990s, the number of Jewish children attending Jewish schools has more than doubled, reaching about 36,000 today, although recently a small decline has been observed.[7] There are currently 136 Jewish schools in the UK, of which 45 are 'mainstream' and 91 serve the strictly orthodox community.

This report focuses on Jewish secondary schools outside the strictly orthodox sector, of which there are nine in England[8]. These schools maintain that they deliver PSHE and RSE according to government guidelines.

The Jewish ethos of a school refers to the underlying values, beliefs, and cultural practices that shape the school's approach to education, discipline, and community life. The relationship between the religious ethos of Jewish schools and that of pupils and their parents can be complex. In most Jewish schools that are modern orthodox in affiliation and ethos, the majority of pupils do not come from

[5] SafeLives (2022). *"I Love It – But Wish It Were Taken More Seriously". Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/I-love-it-but-wish-it-were-taken-seriously_RSE_Report_2022.pdf*
[6] Staetsky, L. Daniel, Boyd, Jonathan *The rise and rise of Jewish schools in the United Kingdom: Numbers, trends and policy issues.* Institute for Jewish Policy Research. 2016: https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-uk422
[7] Lessof, Carli, Possener, Adam *Numbers of Jewish children in Jewish schools: Statistical bulletin for 2021/22 to 2023/24*. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. February 2025: https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-4390
[8] Characteristics of these 9 schools include:
All except for one are under orthodox religious auspices.
- Three of these schools are located outside London and South Hertfordshire.
- Three of these schools include significant numbers of non-Jewish children.
- One school is privately funded.
- One school is largely made up of pupils from orthodox-practising families.

families that strictly adhere to orthodox practice. However, orthodox affiliation and orthodox practice are not necessarily the same thing. In the post-war period, the majority of UK Jews who affiliated to a synagogue affiliated to an orthodox synagogue, yet a minority followed orthodox practice. While this trend has eroded in recent years, acceptance of a 'gap' between personal Jewish ethos and organisational Jewish ethos is deeply embedded in British Jewish culture.[9]

Despite this divergence, Jewish schools are often chosen by parents with the expectation that their children will develop a strong Jewish identity, even if this does not always imply a religious Jewish identity.[10] The 'official' Jewish religious ethos of each school does not always coincide with parent or pupil religious ethos; indeed, in multiple modern orthodox-run schools the majority of parents and pupils do not live their lives according to modern orthodox religious structures. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the same research on Jewish school choice also shows that the high academic standards of many Jewish schools are also a powerful 'pull' factor.

The distinction between school ethos and individual practice becomes particularly relevant in discussions surrounding RSE. The topic of relationships and sexuality is an area where Jewish practices and beliefs can vary significantly between Orthodox and non-Orthodox perspectives.

Understanding these dynamics is essential when exploring the delivery of RSE in Jewish schools. The variation in Jewish practice among students and their families, coupled with the schools' efforts to maintain a cohesive religious ethos, and the RSE curriculum, is likely to shape to the way RSE is taught and received within these institutions.

[9] Graham, David, Boyd, Jonathan Jews in the UK today: Key findings from the JPR National Jewish Identity Survey. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. February 2024: https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-3737

[10] Boyd, Jonathan A Jewish or a non-Jewish school: What lies behind parents' decisions about how to educate their children?. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. September 2023: https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-3677

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

The overarching research objective is to: “Explore the way in which Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is being delivered in Jewish secondary schools and how it is being experienced by pupils”.

This objective was guided by the following research questions:

- What are young people’s experiences of RSE?
- How has RSE influenced young people’s understanding of healthy relationships?
- How have Jewish schools developed and delivered the 2019 RSE curriculum?
- What are teachers’ experiences of delivering RSE?
- What are the barriers and enablers to ensuring RSE can be delivered in Jewish schools most effectively?

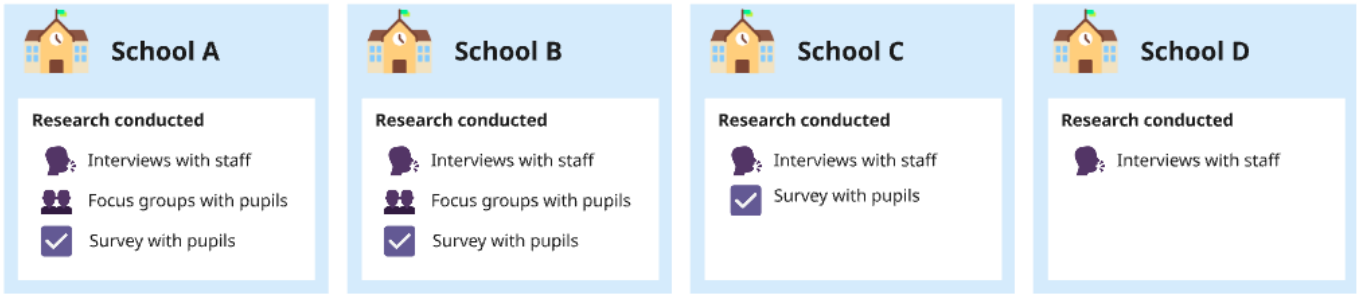
Sample and recruitment

We conducted a mixed-methods research approach with four Jewish secondary schools in England.

The study sample was selected to represent a range of Jewish denominations and levels of orthodoxy, excluding the strictly orthodox sector. The sample is not representative; however, the purposeful sample aims to capture a broad spectrum within the Jewish educational landscape outside the strictly orthodox sector.

A range of qualitative and quantitative activities were carried out in the sample of schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with at least one school staff member involved in RSE at all four schools, while quantitative and/or qualitative research with pupils took place in three schools. The types of activity carried out in each school are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Research activities by school



2.2 Qualitative research

Semi-structured interviews with staff

In total, we conducted eight qualitative interviews with staff. We aimed to achieve breadth and diversity in the sample, interviewing staff with a range of roles and responsibilities, including Rabbis working at

the school, PSHE/RSE Leads[11], and teaching staff. The range of school staff roles that were engaged are outline in Table 1.

Interviews were carried out online by a Social Finance researcher.

Participants were asked about:

- their role in the school,
- how RSE is structured and delivered and their views on this,
- the extent to which they feel the Jewish ethos of the school intersects with RSE,
- challenges and enablers to effective RSE.

Table 1: No. interviews by role

School staff roles	No. interviews
PSHE/RSE Lead	4
Rabbis	2
Teaching staff	2
Total	**8**

Participatory research with young people

In total, 28 young people took part in six focus groups across two schools, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: No. focus groups by school

School	No. focus groups	No. participants
School A	4	18
School B	2	10
Total	**6**	**28**

Focus groups were conducted in groups of 4-6 pupils from Year 10 and Year 11. Participation was voluntary, and parental consent was obtained for all participants. The focus groups were facilitated by a researcher from Social Finance and an experienced youth engagement consultant from the Jewish community. All sessions were audio-recorded.

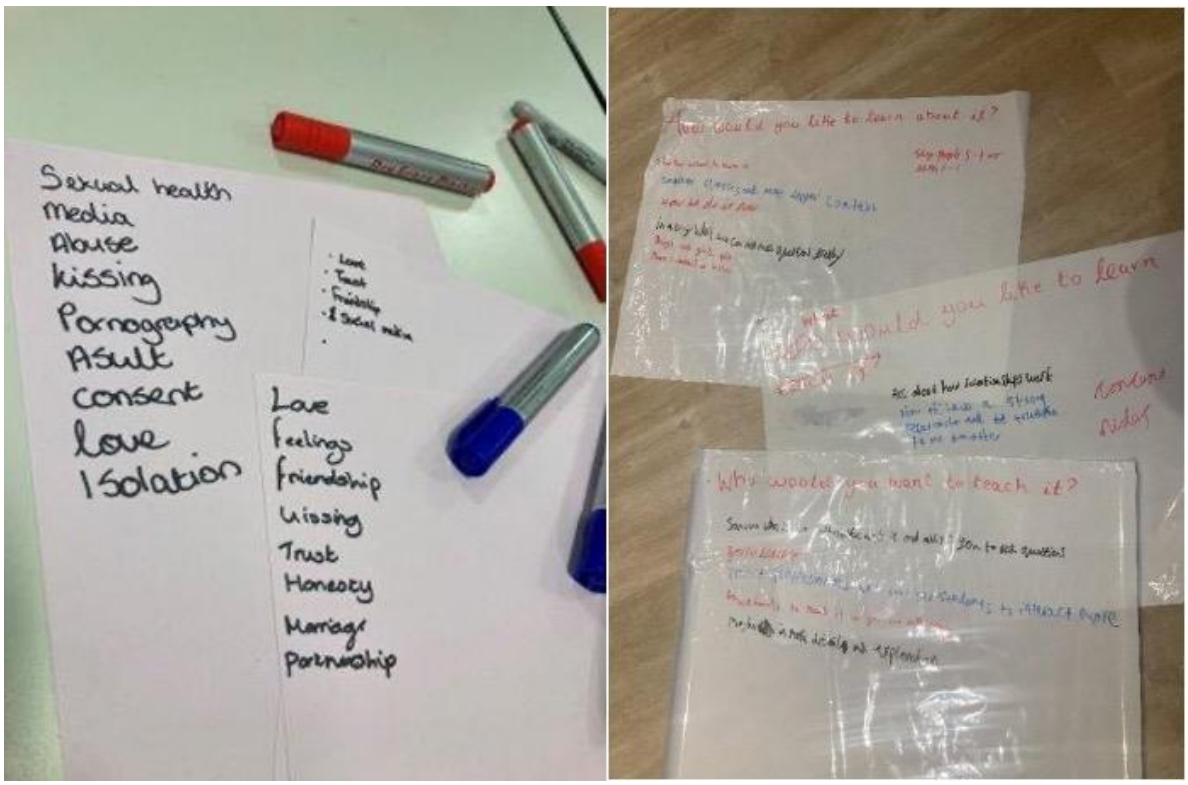
Although RSE is delivered in mixed-gender classes across all participating schools, four focus groups were carried out in single gender groups, while two were comprised of mixed-gender participants. The decision about whether to separate or combine genders was made in collaboration with the schools, considering peer group dynamics and anticipated levels of comfort when discussing sensitive topics with unfamiliar researchers.

Our participatory research approach aimed to create spaces for dialogue, collaboration and expression of agency, using creative activities to support reflective and meaningful engagement. The focus aimed to understand:

- The types of education participants have received in RSE,
- Their thoughts on this education,
- Their views on the impact of this on their understanding of intimacy and relationships, and
- Their vision for what they would like to see from their RSE.

[11] Participant schools used different job titles and wording to describe RSE, and the roles associated with it. However, in this report we use PSHE/RSE Leads to refer to the member of staff who oversees the development and delivery of RSE.

Figure 2: Participatory workshop activities



During the workshops, participants devised and agreed upon a set of ground rules before engaging in two main activities.

The first activity was a 'word race', in which participants were invited to write down as many words connected to relationships and sex as they could think of in one minute, to discuss with the group afterwards. The activity is designed to allow pupils to participate in deciding the words they would like to discuss and reflect upon the education they had or had not received relating to the words.

The second activity, 'Runway Dreams of RSE', was designed to inspire young people to imagine and design their perfect Relationships and Sex Education. Long rolls of whiteboard sheets were used for pupils to write down and subsequently discuss what they would like to learn, who they would like to be taught by, and how they would like to learn RSE.

The participatory activities were inspired by activities included in AGENDA[12], a resource for inclusive activities for practitioners aiming to empower children and young people to make positive relationships and develop inclusive sexuality education.

[12] AGENDA: Supporting Children and Young People in Making Positive Relationships Matte (2016) Available at: https://agendaonline.co.uk/download-agenda/

2.3 Quantitative research

Pupil survey

Three schools participated in the pupil survey, which received 571 valid responses in total. The number of responses gathered in each school are outlined in Table 3.

The survey was conducted with pupils from Year 10 and 11.

This constitutes most of the Year 10 and 11 pupils in each school. In all three schools there was either no, or only a handful of pupils, whose parents had withdrawn them from RSE. It is unclear, yet unlikely that these pupils responded to the pupil survey.

The majority of questions were asked identically across schools. Minor adjustments were made in some instances, such as adjusting wording to reflect how RSE is known to students, in response to school feedback.

Table 3: Survey responses by school

School	No. survey responses
School A	218
School B	177
School C	179
Total	**571**

Parents were informed of the survey via a letter from the school for which JPR provided the suggested wording. No parent requested that their child did not complete the survey. On starting the questionnaire, pupils were given a choice about whether to proceed, which the vast majority did.

The survey of pupils was conducted on an online platform. It was designed to take a short time to complete and many of the questions were adapted from other surveys of RSE in the UK to allow for comparability, together with a small number of questions on Jewish affiliation and practice.

Other than one year group in one school, who were asked to complete the questionnaire at home, the survey was administered in class, either on personal devices or in a computer room. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Teacher survey

A survey for teachers of RSE in Jewish schools was attempted but low response rates meant that the data was not included in this report. The surveys were distributed to teachers in several schools to teachers by email from a senior staff member. Attempts were made to distribute the survey via online Jewish teacher networks, but this did not yield further responses.

While it is likely that capacity constraints and limitations of the distribution method contributed to low response rates, we cannot discount other possibilities, such as sensitivity surrounding discussions of RSE or lack of engagement or interest in the subject.

2.4 Analysis and synthesis approach

Qualitative research activities were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded using the qualitative research software Dovetail. Manual notes were taken for participants who opted out of video or voice recording.

Quantitative data was analysed using the statistics package SPSS, including testing crosstabulations for statistical significance. Only significant results are reported in this report ($p<0.01$). Responses to open questions in the survey were collated and included in the qualitative data analysis.

Qualitative and quantitative insights were triangulated and synthesised during a set of two collaborative workshops between Social Finance and JPR. Each partner drew upon their respective methodological skillsets and subject knowledge to develop key insights, themes and recommendations collaboratively. Our agreed approach was neutral and led by participant-voice and the evidence collected, whilst avoiding passing judgment or devising prescriptive recommendations about how we think Jewish schools should approach RSE.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Creating safe and supportive spaces during research activities is essential, especially when working with young people and on sensitive topics such as RSE. We considered the following practical process for conducting safe research:

Informed consent: All qualitative interview participants received an information sheet and consent form prior to research activities, explaining background to the project, data collection, data storage details, and how to withdraw their data. Verbal consent was also gained prior to interview recording. Young people engaging in focus groups received age-appropriate consent forms using accessible and clear language and parental consent was obtained for all participants. All qualitative research participants were made aware that they may step out or terminate the activity at any point.

Safeguarding protocols: To ensure safeguarding of young people in focus groups, all facilitators underwent a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check to the appropriate level. We liaised with schools to establish clear protocols in place in the event of any potential safeguarding concerns or disclosures during the research that need to be escalated to Safeguarding Leads. Since the survey included open questions, there was a possibility that responses may include safeguarding concerns. Therefore, the survey collected pupil form numbers from participants that were only used in the event of a disclosure. In such an event, form numbers, dates of birth and gender that would allow the school to identify the pupil concerned. Pupils were informed that responses were confidential unless there were concerns about their safety.

Confidentiality and anonymity: The names of participant schools and individuals, including teachers, school staff and young people, were removed at analysis stage and the data pseudonymised. The raw data gathered in qualitative research activities was kept confidential within the research teams, and not shared with teachers or schools, except in occasions during which there was reason to believe the child was at risk. Caution was taken throughout the project preserve the confidentiality of schools.

Location: All qualitative research with young people took place on school premises, in spaces familiar to the participants. This aimed to promote feelings of ease and safety, whilst addressing the power imbalance as researchers came from outside the school community.

Power dynamics: We recognise the uneven power relations present in the 'researcher/participant' relationship. To mitigate for this, we positioned participant young people as 'experts in their own lives', using research activities that were empowering, collaborative, and participant led.

Cultural and religious diversity: We recognise that Jewish communities are diverse, with varying levels of religious observance and cultural practices. To ensure our research was conducted ethically and respectfully, researchers were mindful of cultural norms, language and terminology. We were mindful of Jewish holidays, Shabbat, dietary restrictions when scheduling research activities and providing refreshments. A consultant from the Jewish community co-facilitated all focus groups, to

enable pupils to share their views with a researcher with someone with a shared understanding of their cultural or religious identity. When analysing data, Social Finance collaborated with JPR to ensure our interpretations were culturally informed and accurate.

Data security: All personal data collected was stored securely on Social Finance and JPR internal databases. Video and voice recordings were permanently deleted once analysis was complete and no data will be held after project end.

2.6 Limitations of approach

The research team adopted a rigorous methodology, combining varied and strong sector knowledge with methodological expertise. However, there are some limitations to the research:

School sample: The recruitment of participating schools was a challenge within the time frame. Given the sensitivity of the topic area and current increased socio-political attention on the Jewish community due to international events, relationship building and trust were crucial to school participation. However, despite the efforts of JAT and JPR, only four Jewish schools agreed to take part in this study and two of the four schools agreed to take part in in-person qualitative research with young people. The sample therefore does not intend to represent Jewish schools in England. However, the indicative findings that may well apply to other Jewish schools and they should inform future research in this area.

Teacher voice: We had initially intended to run a survey of teachers of RSE in Jewish schools alongside the pupil survey. However, only a handful of teachers responded in the two schools where it was circulated. We used existing JPR contacts to circulate the survey link to Jewish teachers in other Jewish schools, but this did not result in further responses. The decision was therefore taken to discontinue the teacher survey.

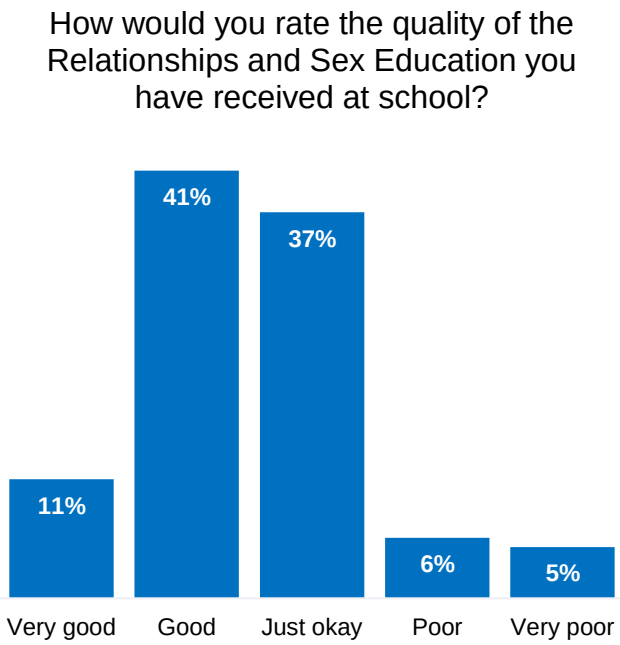
Focus on participant voice as opposed to assessment of quality of RSE: Given the positionality of the partner organisations, our varied experiences researching RSE, and the limited access to schools, it was decided that the approach of this paper would focus on participant reflections on RSE, as opposed to producing an assessment of the quality of RSE in each of the school. As such, this paper does not provide an audit of the RSE statutory guidance topics covered, an assessment of classes and materials, or assessment of teacher quality, and should not be considered as such.

3. Findings

3.1 Young peoples' views

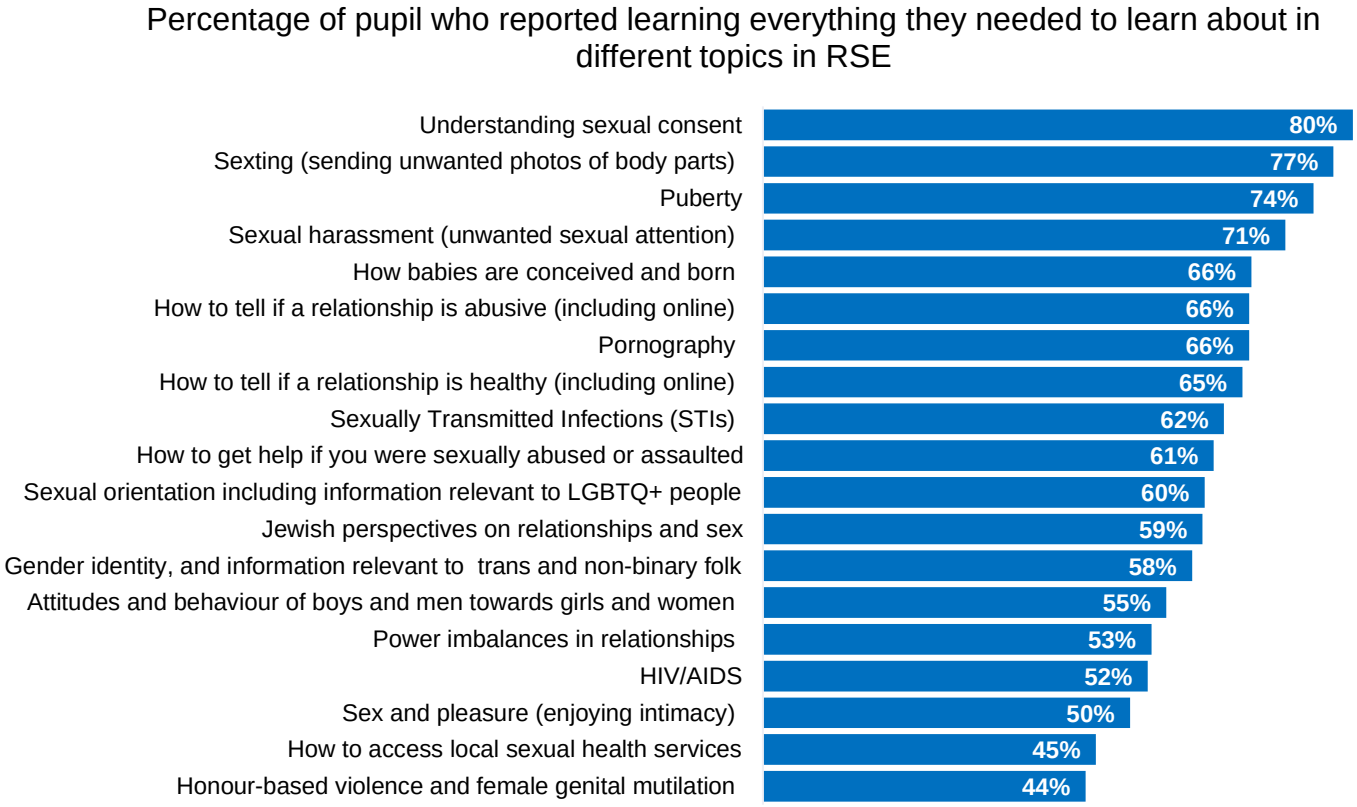
Overall, young people participating in this research feel more positive than negative about the quality of their RSE. Around half (52%) rated it as 'good' or 'very good', while one third (37%) rated it 'just okay'. Only 11% rated it 'poor' or 'very poor'. These findings closely align with the latest findings from the Sex Education Forum's Young People's Poll, which reported that 50% of young people rated their sex education 'good' or 'very good', and 11% of respondents rate the quality of their school RSE as 'bad' or 'very bad' (SEF, 2024). This suggests -according to pupils- the quality of RSE in the Jewish schools participating in this research, is similar to RSE in secular schools.

Figure 2: Pupil views on the quality of their RSE



However, there is significant variation in both the quality and coverage of topics within RSE, with some subjects, such as sexual consent and sexting, being taught more consistently than others. According to this pupil survey, most respondents (80%) reported that they had learnt everything they needed to learn about understanding sexual consent, and 77% said the same about sexting. However, only 44% of respondents reported having learnt everything they needed to about honour-based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM), while just 45% said they had learnt enough about 'how to access local sexual health services' (see DfE's guidance for more information).

Figure 3: Pupil views on topics they learnt in RSE



The topics that are most and least effectively covered in RSE closely align with the findings from the Sex Education Forum Young People's Poll 2024, suggesting that the disparity between how consistently each topic within RSE is taught, is not unique to Jewish schools. However, since all topics within the survey are statutory parts of secondary education, the results illustrate a need to strengthen the lesson content and teacher training related to certain topics.

LGBTQ+ pupils in Jewish schools feel that RSE related to their experiences could be improved. Although 60% of all survey respondents reported that they had learnt everything they need to know about 'Sexual orientation and information relevant to LGBTQ+ people', this drops to just 38% of LGBT+ pupils, suggesting LGBTQ+ pupils in Jewish schools feel RSE relating to their experiences could be strengthened.

Students highlighted the limited specialist knowledge and lack of enthusiasm of some RSE teachers. Focus group participants displayed empathy toward teachers, aware that many have not actively chosen to teach RSE. As a result, pupils noticed that some teachers approach RSE lessons with the intention of encouraging minimal engagement, relying heavily on reading from PowerPoint slides and worksheets. This lack of specialist expertise and confidence to engage with discussion-based activities was seen as a barrier to effective learning and some pupils felt this made it 'awkward' or 'uncomfortable':

"They just teach what they're told to teach, and they like, have a planned lesson. So, **none of the teachers are kind of really wanting to talk loads** and loads about it…they just want to rush through it"

Year 10 Focus Group

"They just made me uncomfortable, the teachers **didn't feel qualified** to teach the subjects"

Pupil Survey Response

Young people in some schools noted that teaching approaches are more prescriptive and negative, with lessons focusing heavily on what young people should *not* do rather than providing balanced, supportive guidance on healthy approaches to relationships.

"It's just more about like, don't have sex till you're 16, do this if you do get pregnant and talk to someone"

Year 10 Focus Group

Recommendation

Provide comprehensive guidance and training for teachers delivering RSE that includes practical strategies for creating a comfortable and open space for dialogue. This should include the provision of resources and materials that teachers can draw on to discuss healthy and positive relationships.

Recommendation

PSHE/RSE Leads could review their RSE syllabus and ensure all statutory RSE requirements are delivered sufficiently, with a focus on areas typically delivered 'less well' such as honour-based violence and female genital mutilation, how to access local sexual health services, and sex and pleasure.

3.2 What young people want from RSE

Young people emphasised the value of a comfortable learning environment that encourages open discussion, supported by positive and strong pupil-teacher relationships. Pupil feedback from focus groups and survey responses show that suggestions for improving RSE focus more on *how* it is taught rather than *what* is taught. While the content of classes and the use of external speakers are acknowledged, these factors are generally seen as less important compared to the classroom environment and the teacher's approach. They expressed a preference for teachers who can connect RSE content to real-life experiences, making lessons feel more relevant and engaging.

When discussing their 'Dreams of RSE', young people in focus groups generally felt that education relating to navigating sexual relationships is covered quite well in RSE yet highlighted a desire to learn more about navigating the emotional aspects of relationships.

Young people describe wanting to learn more about several areas:

'Normal' and healthy relationships: Young people expressed an interest in understanding more about what positive, romantic and intimate relationships should look like, since RSE in some schools tends to focus on negative aspects and what relationships *should not* look like. Pupils discussed the challenges of reality TV and social media and the unrealistic portrayals of relationships they provide, causing confusion:

> "You've seen shows about couples like reality dating and all that and then you see what they posted on Instagram, and like that's what you view as reality. So, let's say you're in a relationship, that's what you're comparing to. And that's obviously unrealistic. So, then you think, **what is realistic? Like, how do I know what I'm doing is right?"**
>
> **Year 10 Focus Group**

Dealing with conflict and arguments: Young people reflected on the need for RSE to address not only the legalistic perspectives on relationships and sex but also support them to develop emotional literacy tools to help them navigate the complexity of relationships. Communication and conflict resolution skills were highlighted in focus groups with boys and girls, as resources they'd like to explore further in RSE:

> "If you're in a relationship and you have like an argument, disagreement, like how, how, where do you go from there?"
>
> **Year 11 Focus Group**

Since RSE is considered a vital preventative approach to reducing the widespread problems of domestic abuse and sexual harassment in schools, it is important that classes support pupils to develop the empathy, self-awareness and critical reasoning skills required to diffuse conflict.

Young people also expressed a desire to receive more practical advice and support relating to certain topics in RSE. This includes advice on:

- **STIs and safer sex:** Two focus groups with boys discussed an interest in discussing practical information such as STI prevention and the risks associated with unsafe sex. This corresponds to our finding that, according to one RSE teacher in a participant school, sexual health education and STIs are not being covered as thoroughly as they should, due to decisions made at senior levels based on religious values.
- **Sexual harassment prevention and response:** Two focus groups with girls discussed their desire for RSE to provide more information on how to respond to sexual harassment and general feelings of a lack of safety. Pupils expressed interest in learning about preventative measures they can take to keep themselves safe, as well as practical advice about how to respond to incidents in the moment:

Only **56%** of pupils rated sexual harassment classes as engaging

> "One time I was on a train with my friends and this complete freak, obviously you're gonna get people like that... But it's like how to deal with it. Cos it's not like if you call the police and there's not nothing much, they can do about it, but it's like, **what to do in that scenario?"**
>
> **Year 11 focus group**

Recommendation

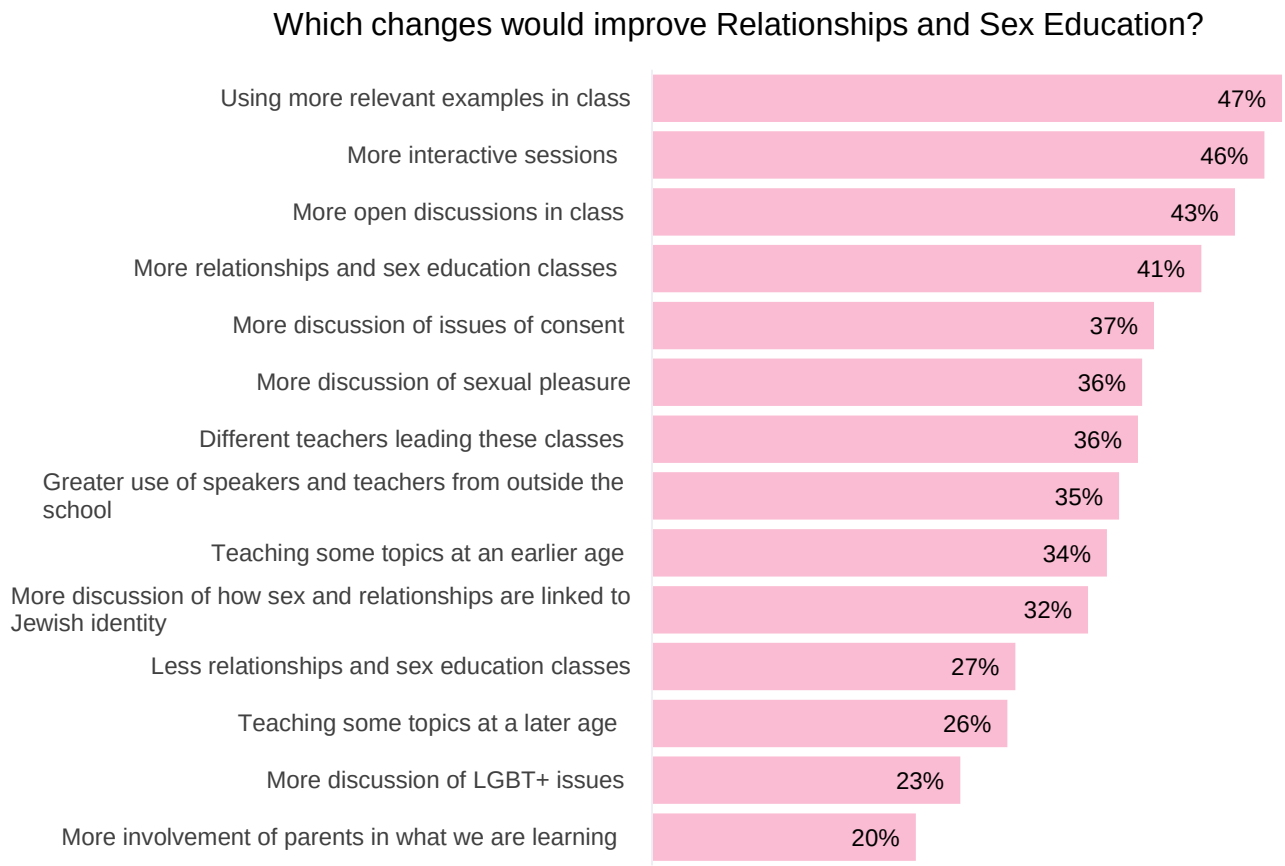
PSHE/RSE Leads in charge of syllabus structure could bolster learning content that addresses young people's emotional development, such as emotional literacy, conflict resolution skills and scenario-based examples that encourage pupils to apply these skills in real life examples.

Young people highlighted the importance of discussion-based learning that feels applicable to their realities.

When asked about how they would improve classes, the most popular options were:

- More want relevant examples (47%)
- More interactive classes (46%)
- More open discussions in class (43%)

Figure 4: Pupil views on desired changes to RSE



The survey results support findings from focus groups too, in which young people highlighted the importance of debates and discussion for maintaining their interest in RSE, to support retention of information, and foster conditions for young people to establish and voice their own opinions. As one Year 10 pupil explained:

> "I think it's quite important that we should have like debates and stuff and, like, try to say your opinion, and have your opinion."
>
> **Year 10 pupil**

For young people to feel comfortable contributing to discussions and avoid feelings of judgment or shame, they suggested that dividing into small groups was beneficial, helping them explore their understanding of a topic without feeling 'judged' or 'embarrassed'.

One pupil also highlighted the usefulness of small group discussions to test and validate their understanding of a situation:

> "You're more likely to do that in a smaller group […] like an unhealthy relationship […] you think it's fine and then you hear like all these people saying, 'oh, if they do that it's not great.'"
>
> **Year 10 pupil**

Pupils reiterated the need for classes to be taught by teachers with specialist knowledge and enthusiasm, with whom they have a trusting and positive relationship, and can enable more engaging learning environments.

> "They [a specialist] can really communicate to the kids and that's the most important thing, like, making sure that everyone understands it and the severity of each thing."
>
> **Year 11 Focus Group**

Survey results show that fewer girls than boys feel comfortable asking questions in RSE classes. According to survey results, under half (46%) of respondents said they felt comfortable asking questions in RSE classes, and an even smaller proportion (40%) of girls felt comfortable asking questions, compared with 52% of boys. This gender disparity may be explained by gender and societal norms, but it is interesting to note that unequal power dynamics that socialise boys to be more assertive and confident in public spaces may impact comfort in this area.

Table 4: Pupil confidence asking questions in RSE

I have felt confident and safe to ask questions during Relationships and Sex Education I have received at my school		
Response	**Male (%)**	**Female (%)**
Strongly or Somewhat Agree	52%	40%
Neither agree not disagree	33%	38%
Strongly or somewhat Disagree	15%	22%

Recommendation

RSE teachers, or those planning the lessons, could reflect on their pedagogical approach to classes and consider increasing the number of interactive, discussion-based based activities that draw on real examples from young people's cultural reference points. This will help pupils to apply critical and emotional literacy skills to situations and help them to establish their viewpoint.

3.3 Relationships and Sex Education as a rapidly evolving subject

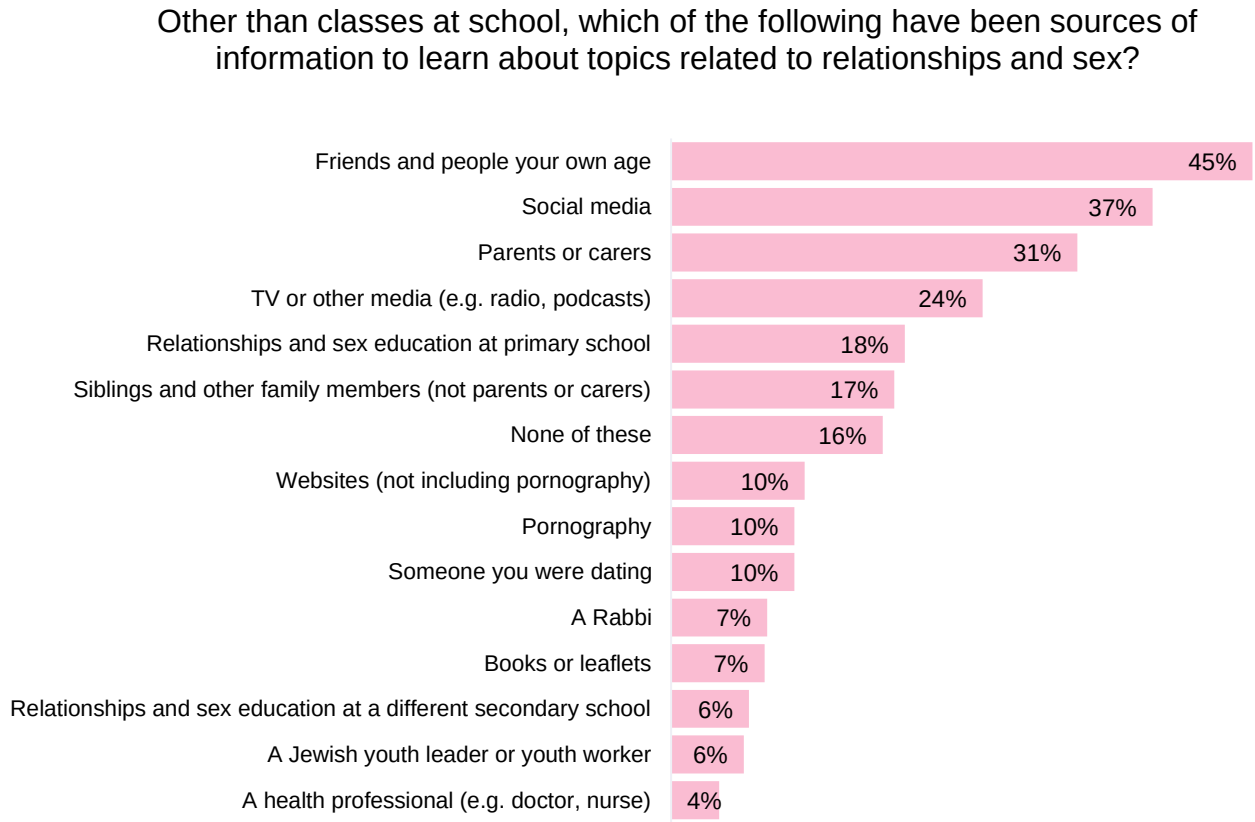
The role and importance of education relating to relationships and sex has expanded and evolved dramatically in the last ten years, requiring schools and teachers to address a wide range of complex topics. The consequences of this shift are felt by teachers and pupils in the Jewish school community, and have had several impacts:

Due to the rapid expansion of the digital landscape, students source information and guidance about relationships and sex from a wide range of sources, often turning to peers and social media for information.

As young people's social lives become increasingly shaped by digital media, they are exposed to a growing amount of online content related to relationships, including discussions around concepts such as 'red flags' and 'gaslighting.' As a result, topics that are often considered culturally taboo and content that may historically have been less commonly accessed, are now more openly shared and discussed among students.

The pupil survey reflects this accessibility and openness: When asked about where they learn about relationships and sex apart from school, the pupil survey found that 45% reported discussing these topics with friends or peers. In addition, 35% cited social media as a key source of information. Nonetheless, more discreet forms of sexual information do remain significant: 31% stated they learned about sex and relationships from parents or carers.

Figure 5: Pupil sources of information on RSE



High expectations are placed on teachers to keep up with the evolution of topics, despite varying levels of confidence teaching certain topics. Teachers commented on the increased prominence of RSE in schools and subsequent additional expectations placed on them, often with little formal training. The conceptualisation and widespread awareness of topics such as consent, sexual exploitation, online abuse, coercion, and harassment, have evolved significantly in the UK, shaped by legal advancements and social movements such as Me Too and Everyone's Invited. In response, teachers and schools have had to adapt rapidly.

A PSHE Lead highlighted the shift in expectations, particularly with the introduction of RSE during tutor time:

> "It was always seen as a fairly secondary thing for teachers. The resources were very…not necessarily very good and not necessarily well showcased and now it's, it's a much bigger role. It's a much bigger part of the tutor's role. I think that...that's probably the biggest difference".
>
> **PSHE Lead**

Some teachers struggle to adapt to these changes and integration of topics that used to be culturally taboo into the core curriculum. One PSHE Lead reflected on this challenge:

> "Some teachers naturally aren't very good or comfortable with talking about some of the things that they have to do… and I think increasingly it's the fact again, talking about the changes, you know, things like consent and sexting and porn and stuff that's now very much part of the Key Stage Five curriculum."
>
> **RSE/PSHE Lead**

Pupils also recognised the challenge teachers face delivering RSE without sufficient training, as some expressed empathy for teachers, noting that teachers did not have adequate RSE themselves (or at least that was their assumption, perhaps reflecting a recognition that the openness and accessibility of sexual material is a recent development). Another Year 11 pupil reflected directly on the perceived difficulty of what is required: *"It's quite a hard job, I guess".*

Schools vary in their approach to RSE teacher training, with some providing structured support and others offering minimal preparation time. This was highlighted by both pupils and teachers in the study. While all four schools participating in this research provide some level of training to staff delivering RSE, the extent of this support for teachers varies and in some cases was minimal.

Other than the youngest, most teachers did not receive extensive Relationships and Sex Education when they were at school compared to today's curriculum. Discussions related to some aspects of Relationships and Sex Education were typically considered inappropriate at least (indeed, until the late 1990s, discussion of most LGBTQ+ issues was effectively prohibited via the Section 28 law).

There seems to be a gap in both experience and training that all but the youngest teachers or most recently qualified are faced with. Schools are not necessarily willing or able to fill that gap. One school which delivers RSE through form tutor time, admitted that due to a combination of strategic sen ior

decisions and resource constraints, they do not prioritise training for teachers delivering RSE. The RSE Lead explained how they had used one of their sessions dedicated for safeguarding *"to kind of do some teacher training on RSE"* highlighting the lack of opportunity for specific RSE training opportunities.

In contrast, another school that designates a specific set of teachers to deliver RSE states that they deliver regular training in RSE, due to the complexity of the subject matter:

> "So RSE is the thing that we make sure that staff are trained on effectively and really comfortable with delivering because it presents really complex conversations in the classroom."
>
> **PSHE Lead**

This shift in expectations of teachers, especially teachers who did not self-select to teach RSE, and the disparity in training raises important questions about how best to support teachers to deliver high-quality RSE that meets the needs of pupils.

To address the potential gap between teacher knowledge and student experiences, research has identified peer-led sessions as an effective tool. One PSHE Lead emphasised the value of these sessions:

> "Having peer-led sessions around that has been really, really good**… they told us stuff that blew our minds, you know, about what happens in Year 8** and what the kids are actually looking at on the internet and what they're sending on social media."
>
> **PSHE Lead**

Recommendation

Jewish schools should cooperate to develop specific training on RSE that considers the unique context and challenges of Jewish schools and their pupil cohort. Schools may want to reflect on their overall RSE package on a yearly basis, examining whether it meets the current emotional and educational needs of their pupils, beyond the topics included in the statutory guidance. This would allow provision to be to relevant, contextualised and informed by the specific needs of their pupils and school ethos.

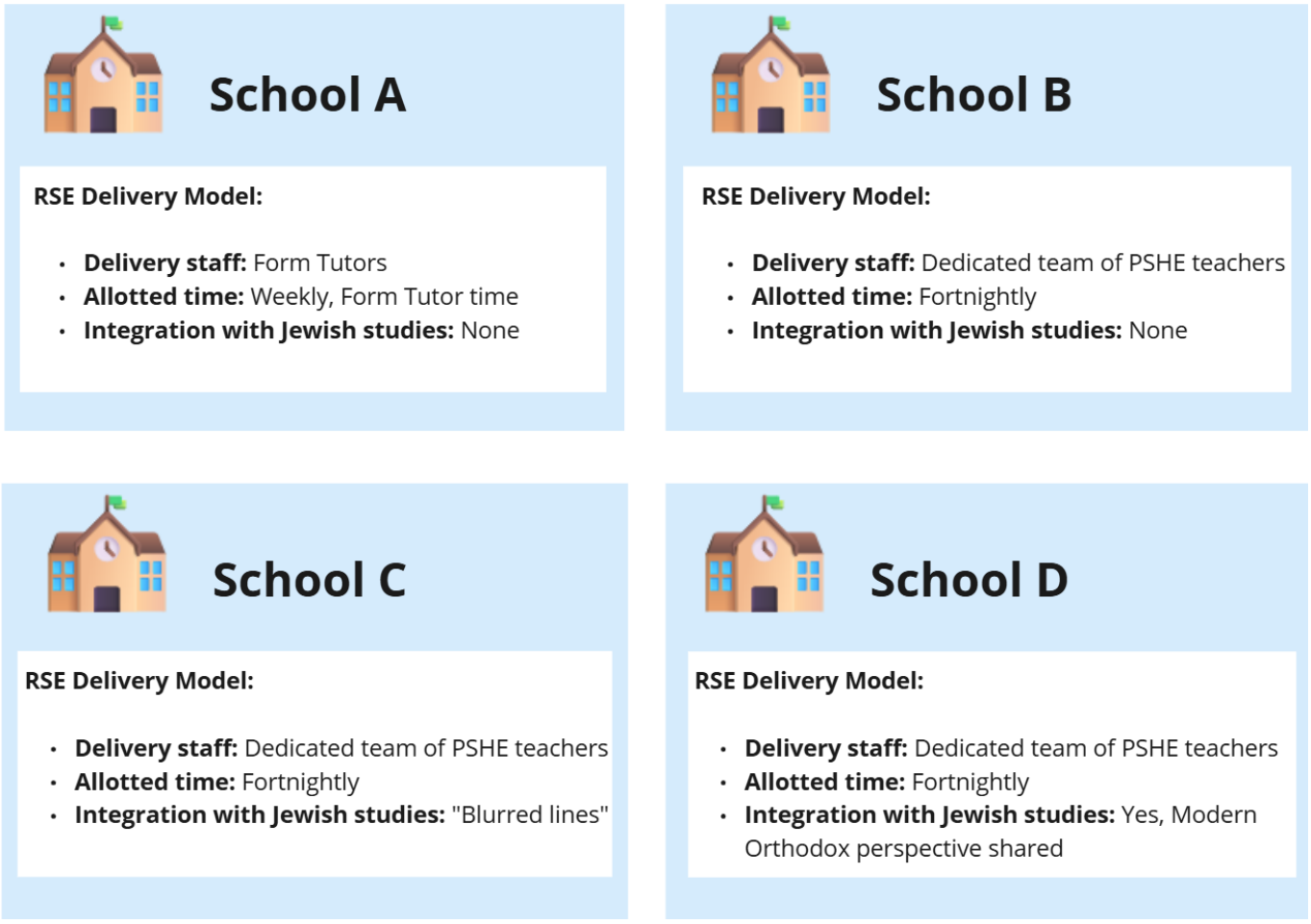
3.4 Model of delivery

3.4.1 Structure, timetabling and staffing

Interviews with RSE Leads in all four Jewish schools revealed variation in approaches to delivering the RSE curriculum, including who it is taught by, in what time period, how frequently, use of external facilitators, and the extent to which lessons are integrated with the specific Jewish ethos of the school.

All schools deliver the content of the RSE guidance within PSHE classes - or equivalent[13]. Three of the four schools deliver RSE through a dedicated team of PSHE teachers and hold classes fortnightly. Two of the four schools no dot integrate Jewish teaching within RSE. Details of the delivery models for each school are summarised below:

Figure 6: School model of RSE delivery



As well as the differences outlined in the infographics, participating schools shared some characteristics. These include:

[13] Although all schools provide PSHE, participating schools have assigned a different name to the classes. The names are not shared to maintain school confidentiality.

- All participating schools conduct RSE classes with mixed gender groups.
- All participating schools deliver RSE via internal staff resources, but all invite external speakers on from organisations such as Keshet UK, Jewish Women's Aid, Streetwise, to supplement the school's own delivery.
- All except one school, had their school's RSE curriculum shaped and reviewed by a religious authority - in many cases by a Rabbi who is part of the school staff.

3.5 Variation in prioritisation

The extent to which schools prioritised RSE varied, influencing the way it was delivered. All participating schools demonstrated awareness of the statutory requirements for RSE, recognising its importance in equipping young people with essential knowledge in an increasingly digital world. However, feedback from teachers and an assessment of how RSE is structured and delivered at the schools, reveals variation in the importance RSE holds according to each school.

> "To be honest, it's just that PSHE is **not a top priority for the school**…but, you know, that's cos it's pretty good, it's in place."
>
> **PSHE Lead**

> "By the time it became statutory, we were about a year ahead of ourselves in that we had **everything in place to tick all of the boxes** somewhere within the school."
>
> **PSHE Lead**

Research revealed variation in the level of resource dedicated to RSE, including resource required to establish a dedicated team of RSE teachers and to provide regular high-quality RSE training.

Other schools reflected on the benefits of having a dedicated set of trained RSE teachers:

> "But actually, we realised that **we really needed a dedicated trained team of PSHE teachers** to make it effective…because really it was, **it was ineffective** before teachers weren't comfortable or confident teaching content…teachers didn't enjoy it. Teachers weren't confident doing it. Teachers didn't have the knowledge or skill..."
>
> **PSHE Lead**

These variations in approach indicate a difference in prioritisation and highlight the differences in how RSE is implemented across schools, with some embedding it more deeply into their educational framework while others seem to focus mainly on meeting statutory obligations.

3.6 Parental engagement

Research with all four participating schools found that although schools communicate with parents via email about RSE, there was no active engagement in the subject from parents. We found no evidence that parents were involved in shaping when, what or how discussions about Relationships and Sex Education are approached. One school reported that a couple of pupils were removed from class following requests by parents, but all other schools reported no requests to remove pupils from sex education classes.

This contradicts some literature and dominant media narratives that parents, particularly parents of students in faith schools', fear an erosion in their rights and 'indoctrination based on ideology' (Phillips et al, 2025). A specific example within the Jewish community highlights a group of Charedi Rabbis calling for parents to remove their children from sex education classes when RSE became mandatory in 2019. (Rocker, 2019). This does not appear to be the case in the schools participating in this research.

Parents' lack of engagement with RSE may indicate a lack of interest towards RSE or may suggest a sense of trust parents place in the hands of schools. Either way, research suggests that sensitivities of parents of children at faith-based schools, in this case Jewish schools, may be less significant than might be assumed.

3.7 School staff experiences

Conversations with PSHE Leads and teachers delivering parts of RSE shed light on the practical approaches and skills commonly adopted, as well as their reflections on the joys, challenges, enablers and wider contextual factors that impact the delivery of RSE.

Challenges and barriers

- Identifying teachers for RSE: PSHE/RSE Leads in charge of delivering RSE spoke of staffing challenges due to financial constraints and the potential knock-on effect on other subjects.

One PSHE Lead from a school which delivers PSHE through form tutors explained that they'd ideally have their **"top teachers, your heads of department, SLT possibly, doing PSHE because they'd probably be the most comfortable and confident doing it, but then you take them out of the subject…and the priority for the school is A Levels."** They acknowledged that form tutors are **"likely [to be] worse at PSHE"** than they are at their own subjects since it is not their specialism. However, they noted that a dedicated team of RSE teachers is expensive and something they didn't believe they could afford as **"you'd have to really redo the entire staffing model".**

Another school which has a dedicated team of RSE teachers highlighted the challenge of identifying skilled and interested teachers to join the team and provides incentives as a recognition for putting themselves forward**, "to say, actually, you're doing something out of the mould".**

> "It's hard to put the team together of people that want to do it, people that would be good at it and people where it doesn't have such a knock-on effect on their other subjects"
>
> **PSHE Lead**

- **Lack of preparation time**: Since RSE is often the secondary topic taught by teachers and finding time to engage with, plan and feel comfortable with subjects can be difficult. One PHSE lead considered: “do they have the headspace and the time to really engage with the resources in advance and think about how they work?"

- **Potential discomfort with certain topics**: Some teachers mentioned topics that they found more difficult or uncomfortable to discuss with pupils, particularly some areas which are newer to the curriculum such as sexting. Some explained that this was compounded by mixed gender classes, and two teachers felt it might be easier for lessons on certain topics to be taught to girls and boys separately to enable young people to discuss the differential impact of certain behaviours with a teacher of the same gender.

- **Insufficient subject specific training**: Some teachers shared that there was no training specifically for RSE which may impact a teacher’s ability to engage with and feel confident in delivering the content.

> "No, there's no training or anything. You'll just sit together with your head every year, they’ll say this is what we're going to be discussing, this is the material, go and do it."
>
> **Delivery staff**

Enablers

Teachers acknowledged the range of behavioural management, facilitation and personal relationship skills at the heart of delivering engaging RSE.

- Classroom management: RSE requires good behavioural management and moderation skills, since pupil behaviour may be affected by embarrassment or feelings of awkwardness due to the culturally taboo nature of certain topics. One teacher admitted that he “tend[s] to run a tighter ship when I'm teaching these issues because I very much want to avoid silly comments or it falling out of control." Whilst other teachers took a different approach, seeing the value in breaking the taboo and allowing for a more open dialogue:

> "When you're talking to, you know, year sevens about the inside of a vagina or a vulva or a penis, all these things like, you know, it's my approach is very much you're allowed to laugh because, you know, this is funny and this is awkward and these are words that you're not supposed to be using because you think they're rude words and the approach is very much like it's OK to laugh."
>
> **Delivery staff, Interview**

- **Being open about personal experiences and opinions**: Some teachers said that sharing their own opinions and personal experiences of relationships can be a useful tool to improve engagement in RSE:

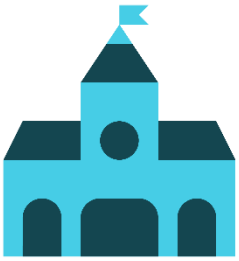
> “Students are interested in hearing our opinions, and they become disengaged when we say, I'm not going to tell you what I think."
>
> **Delivery staff, Interview**

- **Providing an informal setting:** Treating RSE classes as a 'different' type of class and providing a more informal setting was considered to be beneficial for students. One RSE lead who favoured this approach said that this “allows students to express themselves that they probably wouldn't in more front led teaching…it creates an atmosphere of ease and trust."

Recommendation

Jewish AIDS Trust and Jewish schools should develop a collaborative RSE Learning Network. This would create opportunities for RSE teachers to exchange best practices, navigate challenges unique to Jewish school settings, and share experiences, not only within their own schools but also across the wider Jewish school network. This may consist of informal peer discussion groups, online forums, or in-person meetups.

3.8 Impact of Jewish ethos



This section focuses on the extent to which, if at all, the Jewish ethos of the school impacts the delivery of RSE.

According to the statutory guidance, schools in England must consider ‘the religious background of all pupils’ and the ‘religious and philosophical convictions’ of parents in their teaching (Department for Education, 2019). As a result, schools have some autonomy in determining whether and how to integrate the Jewish ethos of the school with the delivery of RSE.

Two of the four schools in our sample generally treated RSE as separate to the Jewish ethos of the school, whilst the other two schools viewed RSE to be intrinsically connected to the Jewish values of the school.

One school that made a deliberate decision to cover all topics in RSE without offering a Jewish perspective on them, felt it was important that pupils receive the same information as pupils at other schools and felt unqualified to provide Jewish perspectives on different RSE topics:

> "We don't do any Jewish perspective in PSHE… I leave the Jewish stuff to the people who are qualified to do the Jewish studies."
>
> **PSHE Lead**

Conversely, the other two schools viewed discussions relating to relationships and sex as intrinsically linked to religious beliefs and identity, suggesting more 'blurred lines' between Jewish teaching and RSE. In one school, Modern Orthodox Jewish viewpoints are 'subtly' integrated into all RSE lessons, towards the end of the topic. However, the extent and impact of this approach were unclear from our research.

In another school, the Head of RSE explained that the school "ideally would have loved RSE to be taught by Jewish Studies teachers' only" since they "don't consider RSE to be a secular subject". In the past the school tried to implement this, however they received feedback from students that they weren't comfortable and felt this set of teachers were 'more religious' and as such 'didn't have the same lived experience as them', so they expanded the pool of teachers to include teachers of other subjects. They explained:

> "[We] see RSE as both being an element of Jewish life and learning but also understand the limitations and RSE as a statutory subject…it's a delicate dance"
>
> **PHSE/ RSE Lead**

It is worth noting that some schools may hire non-Jewish teachers, for whom teaching the Jewish perspective on RSE may be challenging. This may be another reason why some schools separate RSE and the Jewish ethos of the school.

Our research indicates that there may be a link between the qualities and interests of teachers who teach RSE and those who teach Jewish Studies. Teachers and students highlighted several overlaps in teaching styles that are considered vital for providing engaging RSE and Jewish Studies classes.

Both subjects require a series of skills that enable teachers to:

- facilitate discussions on nuanced topics such as ethics, morality and human interaction,
- manage classroom debates effectively,
- foster positive relationships that build trust and create comfortable environment with students.

> "I definitely think there is a link in terms of the style of teaching, you know, we want this to be a lesson that students can feel relaxed to speak their mind and hear certain things that they're not going to hear in other lessons. It's not assessed, which is also like informal Jewish education."
>
> **PSHE Lead**

As one Year 10 pupil reflects: "It's more like student led […] it's a lot more about the students' opinions and views rather than this is kind of copy of the facts".

Some teachers noted that their background in delivering informal Jewish education has supported their RSE teaching skills. Jewish youth camps often encourage reflective discussions about identity, relationships, and personhood, which align well with the themes explored in RSE. One PSHE Lead explained that for RSE and youth work **"they're kind of both interested in developing the child."**

In addition to the overlap of the skills and classroom environments of RSE and Jewish Studies, **one Rabbi we spoke with went further to suggest an intrinsic connection between Judaism and healthy attitudes towards sex and sexuality.** They explained:

> "Judaism has a very healthy attitude towards sex and sexuality; it's not prudish. We have a sexuality about us, and that's not something Judaism condemns... I'm part of a generation that's not scared… it's part of human life. People normalise sex as being Kosher; sex is not seen as deviant."
>
> **Rabbi**

Case study

In one participating school, staff organise an annual event in which pupils are asked to anonymously submit questions relating to relationships and sex, which would subsequently be answered by both the school Rabbi and a Biology teacher.

The Rabbi interviewed had had positive pupil feedback from this and felt this was a useful way of enabling the pupil to hear "the two truths" that speak to religious and scientific perspectives on different questions.

These insights illustrate how the teaching of RSE and Jewish Studies can draw upon shared themes, values, and teaching strategies, strengthening the delivery of both subjects in Jewish schools.

Jewish organisations have provided valuable support and advice on appropriate and culturally sensitive delivery of RSE. All participant schools work with or use resources from Jewish organisations and three of the four schools developed their RSE programme of study in collaboration with Rabbis.

All schools highlighted the usefulness of drawing on the support and resources from Jewish organisations such as Jewish Women's Aid, Streetwise, Kisharon and Keshet. It was felt that these organisations provided specialist expertise and provided a layer of trust as organisations from within the Jewish community, as a teacher reported; it helps them make sure they don't **"say something that's at odds with Jewish ethos"** because they work within the same space.

There are some areas of conflict within the sexual health elements of the curriculum and Orthodox Jewish beliefs.

There is some evidence to suggest that the sexual health education within RSE is considered at odds with some Orthodox Jewish beliefs upheld by at least one school. A Rabbi working in one participating school said they thought that the 'only real difference' between their school and a 'normal state comprehensive' would be that they refrain from conducting condom demonstrations.

> "We would talk about condoms, but we wouldn't do a demonstration because in Jewish law they are problematic."
>
> **Rabbi and Head of Jewish Studies.**

However, one teacher from the same school felt that sexual health education more generally was not being delivered sufficiently and that the school was not fulfilling its duty to provide the statutory minimum and necessary information to keep young people safe. They pointed to a tension between adhering to Orthodox Jewish values and providing comprehensive sexual health education:

> "The school has a little bit of an issue here because, you know, if you're teaching kids how to have safe sex, then it's almost like you're giving them a stamp of approval to go and have safe sex, where the orthodox values say that, you know, sex is something ideally that should be kept for marriage."
>
> **RSE delivery teacher**

Yet, despite their personal Orthodox beliefs, the same teacher emphasised the importance of addressing and prioritising the "reality" of young people's lives, namely that "some of these kids are sexually active from year 9 potentially".

He noted that despite raising concerns with senior leaders "time and time again over the years", the school still did not, in their view, sufficiently cover topics such as STIs and contraception in RSE:

"I just don't think that there is sex education in the school. The best response I've ever had is it's covered in biology… but it's not taught as a separate topic under the banner of RSE or PHSE." RSE delivery teacher

Focus group discussions with young people support this finding, as they revealed a desire from young people to learn more about safer sex, STIs and practical information for sexual health support e.g. condom demonstrations. Additionally, survey data showed that only 45% of respondents agreed that they had learnt all they needed to learn about 'How to access local sexual health services'- the second lowest topic of 19.

Only **45%** of pupils had learnt all they needed to know about 'How to access local sexual health services'

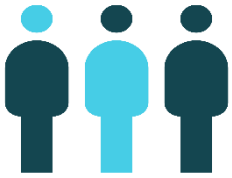
It is unclear how far pupils in Jewish schools simply accept the possibility of a gap between their own practices and values and those of the schools. In our survey, we found Jewish affiliation and practice have very little impact in terms of reported experiences of RSE. However, as discussed in previous sections, data from pupil focus groups, does, in some cases, suggest that some pupils push back against the school ethos regarding certain aspects of RSE. It does not, however, suggest a wholesale rejection of either the school ethos on its own or as it applies to RSE.

Recommendation

PSHE Leads should conduct a thorough review of RSE provision to ensure all statutory elements are comprehensively covered, with particular attention to the section on 'Intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health,' to meet statutory requirements and address student needs effectively.

3.8.1 LGBTQ+ sexual relationships and Judaism

There are areas of complexity when aligning Orthodox Jewish values and LGBTQ+ inclusion in RSE. Across all schools, there was a shared commitment to treating all individuals, including LGBTQ+ people, with respect, kindness, and care. PSHE/RSE Leads and delivery staff emphasised the importance of ensuring classes were inclusive.



However, there was variation observed in how open the school ethos was in terms of LGBTQ+ relationships. One school described themselves as an inclusive school, celebrating Pride Week annually, hosting a LGBTQ+ student group, and previously running a staff task force dedicated to promoting inclusivity. One staff member explained that "for us, it is our Jewish values…it's not hard for us, there's no tension there."

Another school explained that they make a distinction between LGBTQ+ people and their rights to live peacefully as respected members of the Jewish community, and LGBTQ+ sexual activity, which is prohibited in Jewish Law, according to certain denominational beliefs. The school added that they refer to guidance from the Chief Rabbi on homophobia which says that it is "completely forbidden" and "kindness is always necessary".

The PSHE/RSE Lead at this school described efforts to set up a LGBTQ+ club for pupils, but admitted that there were concerns of a 'fear of encouragement' and explained that they struggled to attract attendees:

> "Sounds terrible to say it, but there was a sort of feeling we don't necessarily want to encourage it because it's not in the Jewish ethos."
>
> **PSHE Lead, referencing an LGBTQ club**

LGBTQ+ pupils may have different experiences of RSE compared to their peers.

Survey results indicated that LGBTQ+ pupils were more dissatisfied with RSE, with 24% rating it as 'very poor' or 'poor' compared to just 10% of heterosexual pupils. However, the proportion of LGBTQ+ pupils who rated their RSE as 'very good' or 'good' was comparable to heterosexual pupils, suggesting a mixed experience overall.

Table 5: Quality of RSE by sexual orientation

How would you rate the quality of the Relationships and Sex Education you have received at school?		
Response	**LGB+[14] (%)**	**Heterosexual (%)**
Very good/Good	53%	54%
Just okay	24%	37%
Very poor/Poor	24%	10%

[14] LGB+ refers to pupils who identified in the survey as *Lesbian*, *Gay*, *Bisexual* or *Other*

Focus group discussions with young people highlighted awareness of the tension that can exist between Orthodox Jewish beliefs and LGBTQ+ relationships. In one Year 10 focus group, pupils reflected on the challenges of being part of the Jewish community and attending a Jewish school in relation to attitudes toward LGBTQ+ relationships. Some pupils described feelings of isolation:

"I think going to a Jewish school, you're surrounded by Jewish girls and boys who have Jewish parents that are girl and boy parents, and then Jewish weddings you go to... I think that's what makes it harder for people that aren't like that. That's the normality and it's like that's set. In other schools that aren't Jewish schools, I think that wouldn't happen. I think it's more normal."- Year 10 pupil

The same pupil went on to describe how these feelings of isolation were compounded by being part of the Jewish community in England, as a minority group:

> "We're already such a minority... there's not many Jewish people in England. Being Jewish is different enough, and then being gay and Jewish is just... you're just... and also it's hard. If you were gay and Jewish, it's hard to relate to other Jewish [people]."
>
> **Year 10 Focus Group**

These insights underscore the complexity of navigating LGBTQ+ education within RSE in some Jewish schools and highlight the need for supportive approaches that respect both religious values and the experiences of LGBTQ+ students.

Recommendation

All Jewish schools should strive to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment where all students feel valued, while also recognising the religious principles that shape the school ethos. They could include establishing a LGBT+ student group that meets with staff to discuss any concerns and potential solutions.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This report explores how Jewish schools outside the strictly Orthodox sector have responded to the statutory requirements for Relationships and Sex Education and examines how cultural values and ethos have influenced their approach.

The landscape of RSE has evolved significantly in recent years, with increasing recognition from government bodies and institutions of its transformative role in preventing abuse and sexual harassment. Schools are now expected to align their practices with updated guidance.

Our findings show that participating schools have adapted to these statutory requirements, delivering RSE that broadly aligns with the mandated content, though with varying levels of depth and emphasis. While these schools are, broadly speaking, delivering information as required in most areas, there are significant differences in the degree of pupil engagement between schools. 'Going beyond' what the curriculum requires and generating engaged discussions is a significant challenge that is met variably across schools and across different teachers within schools.

Teachers and school staff expressed challenges in delivering RSE, particularly due to the complex and fast evolving nature of some RSE topics. Confidence and comfort in teaching these subjects is varied, and identifying suitable staff to deliver RSE remains a challenge. Limited time and budget for training further complicate these efforts. Educators highlighted that strong classroom and behaviour management skills, fostering reflective and open dialogue, and creating informal learning environments are effective strategies for strengthening RSE delivery.

Pupils generally reported more positive than negative views of their RSE experience. Elements they value are comfortable learning environments that encourage open discussion, underpinned by positive pupil-teacher relationships. While some pupils expressed indifference toward RSE, others suggested ways they would like to see it improved including a greater focus on healthy relationships, emotional resilience, conflict resolution, and practical advice on seeking support.

We observed differences in how the participating Jewish schools incorporate their ethos into RSE delivery. Some schools intentionally separate Jewish values from the RSE curriculum, whilst others highlight inherent overlaps between the discussions of identity and social relations that are central to both RSE and informal Jewish education. In some schools, points of contention arose around topics such as LGBTQ+ relationships and sexual health education, as reported by both pupils and staff.

Based on these findings, we have developed a series of recommendations to support Jewish schools in enhancing their RSE provision and addressing the identified challenges. The recommendations have been developed to apply to all secondary schools in England, not only Jewish schools.

Recommendations

Training

- **Recommendation 1:** Schools should provide comprehensive guidance and training for teachers delivering RSE that includes practical strategies for creating a comfortable and open space for dialogue. This should include the provision of resources and materials that teachers can draw on to discuss healthy and positive relationships.
- **Recommendation 2:** Jewish schools should cooperate to develop specific training on RSE that considers the unique context and challenges of Jewish schools and their pupil cohort. Schools may want to reflect on their overall RSE package on a yearly basis, examining whether it meets the current emotional and educational needs of their pupils, beyond the topics included in the statutory guidance. This would allow provision to be to relevant, contextualised and informed by the specific needs of their pupils and school ethos.

Curriculum

- **Recommendation 3:** PSHE/RSE Leads should review their RSE syllabus and ensure that all statutory RSE requirements are delivered sufficiently, with a focus on areas typically delivered 'less well' such as honour-based violence and female genital mutilation, how to access local sexual health services, and sex and pleasure.
- **Recommendation 4:** PSHE/RSE Leads in charge of syllabus structure could bolster learning content that addresses young people's emotional development, such as emotional literacy, conflict resolution skills and scenario-based examples that encourage pupils to apply these skills in real life examples.
- **Recommendation 5:** PSHE Leads should conduct a thorough review of RSE provision to ensure all statutory elements are comprehensively covered, with particular attention to the section on 'Intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health,' to meet statutory requirements and address student needs effectively.

Pedagogy

- **Recommendation 6:** RSE teachers, or those planning the lessons, could reflect on their pedagogical approach to classes and consider increasing the number of interactive, discussion-based activities that draw on real examples from young people's cultural reference points. This will help pupils to apply critical and emotional literacy skills to situations and help them to establish their viewpoint.

Inclusive ethos and approach

- **Recommendation 7:** All Jewish schools should strive to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment where all students feel valued, while also recognising the religious principles that shape the school ethos. In strictly orthodox-run schools, this involves providing thoughtful guidance on LGBTQ+ topics within RSE that acknowledges Orthodox Jewish perspectives, ensuring discussions are handled with care and sensitivity. Staff training on navigating these complex areas may help foster a respectful dialogue.

Learning across schools

- **Recommendation 8:** Jewish AIDS Trust should support Jewish schools to develop a collaborative RSE Learning Network. This would create opportunities for RSE teachers to exchange best practices, navigate challenges unique to Jewish school settings, and share experiences, not only within their own schools but also across the wider Jewish school network. This may consist of informal peer discussion groups, online forums, or in-person meetups.

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