

FEBRUARY 2021



# Island Wide RSE Survey

Results and survey  
breakdown

# About Love To Know

Love To Know was founded in 2020 by Courtney Allison and Sara Haller with the view to bring about a seismic change to the way our island's educational institutions provide Relationship and Sex Education (henceforth referred to as RSE) to the young people of this island. Love To Know is fighting for inclusive, comprehensive, evidence-based positive Relationship and Sex Education for all young-people, North and South, on the island of Ireland. Love To Know is working to impose an external learning structure on both education systems in Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland that functions regardless of the ethos of the school.

## Why conduct this survey?

In order to begin this project, a survey of opinion and experience of RSE on this island was necessary. Our initial query was informed by a 2019 report by the Northern Ireland Youth forum (NIYF, 2019), as well as a report published in 2020 by the Economic and Social Research Institute in The Republic of Ireland (ESRI, 2020). Both reports outline the dire state of RSE provision across this island. In order for Love To Know to best serve its target beneficiary, the young people of this island, we needed a recent and honest assessment of RSE on this island. Including both Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland in the same survey allows for the island to work collaboratively to build an RSE system equal to the calibre of its population.

# Scope of survey

To date, no other cross-border survey has been conducted on attitudes and experiences of RSE. From the outset, Love To Know has been operating with an all-island approach. The rationale for this is thus:

- The contents of an RSE curriculum is based on science and should not be subject to amendment by any state, school board or school. There is no reason for core information to differ from one county to the next.
- Our young people do not stop socialising at the border. Two towns, separated by a border and a mile, should not have a difference in access to vital life information. No young person should be put at a disadvantage due to their postcode.
- The collusion between religious institutions and the state, such as the scandals and tragedy of the mother and baby homes, has not been isolated to the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland also has work to do in improving societal attitudes and collective knowledge of RSE.

# Aims of Survey

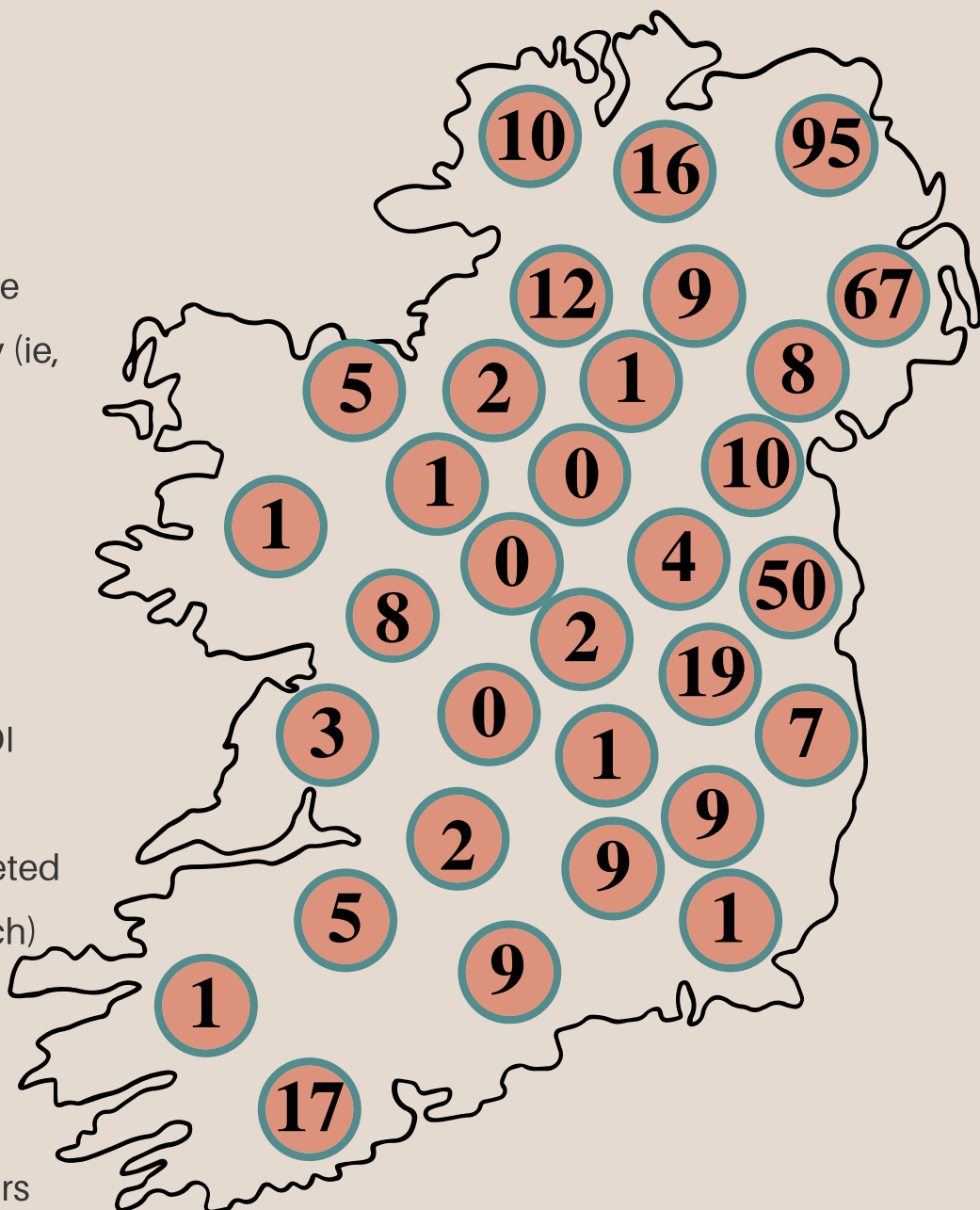
- To include a cross border assessment of attitudes to RSE on the Island of Ireland
- To identify key themes in the RSE experienced by young people
- To assess the appetite for change and reform to RSE provision on the Island of Ireland

# Sample Location

*404 survey responses from across the Island of Ireland*

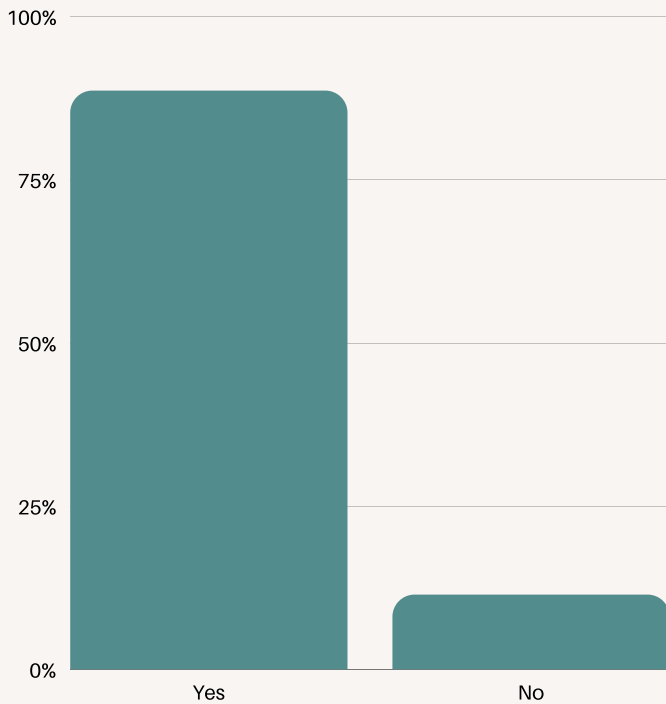
The survey had 404 respondents, though some chose to not disclose their location of secondary education or did not provide the level of detail necessary (ie, "Ulster"). Each circle below represents the number of respondents from each corresponding location.

Though Love To Know had endeavoured to include ROI equally to NI in survey respondents (through targeted marketing and organic reach) there were limitations in gaining a proportionate southern response rate, as both Love To Know founders are from Northern Ireland .



# Headline Findings

- **11.86% of respondents had never received any formal RSE**



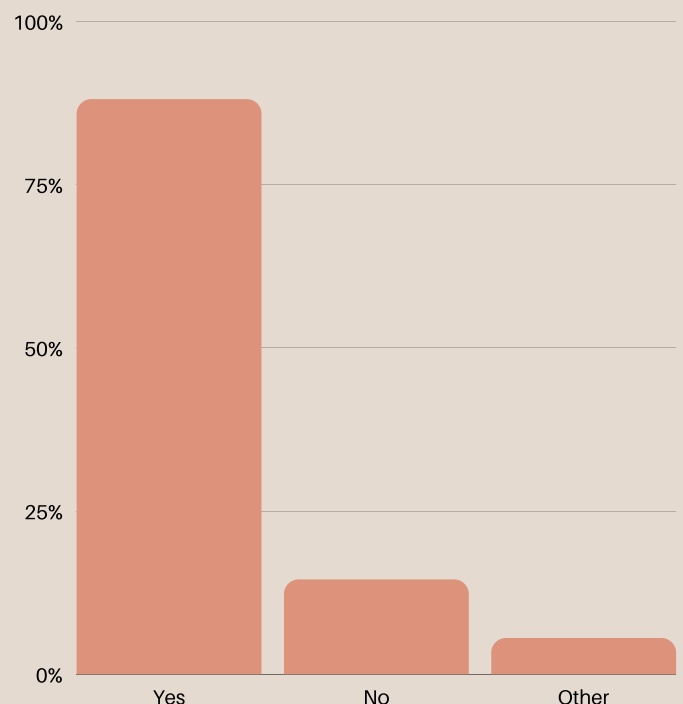
## Q1: Did you receive any Relationship and Sex Education in school?

11.86% of our sample had not received any RSE in school. This question did not seek to assess quantity of RSE sessions, or quality of the RSE information received - rather just the existence of it. If we were to extrapolate this data to the current population of the island, this would mean 792,000 people had never received RSE. It is likely this number is higher as we specifically sampled under 40s, and also due to the sample bias being to populated coastal areas with major towns and cities. It is likely there is a dearth of RSE provision in the more rural counties of this island that this survey did not reach.

- **Over 80% of respondents felt the ethos of their school impacted RSE**

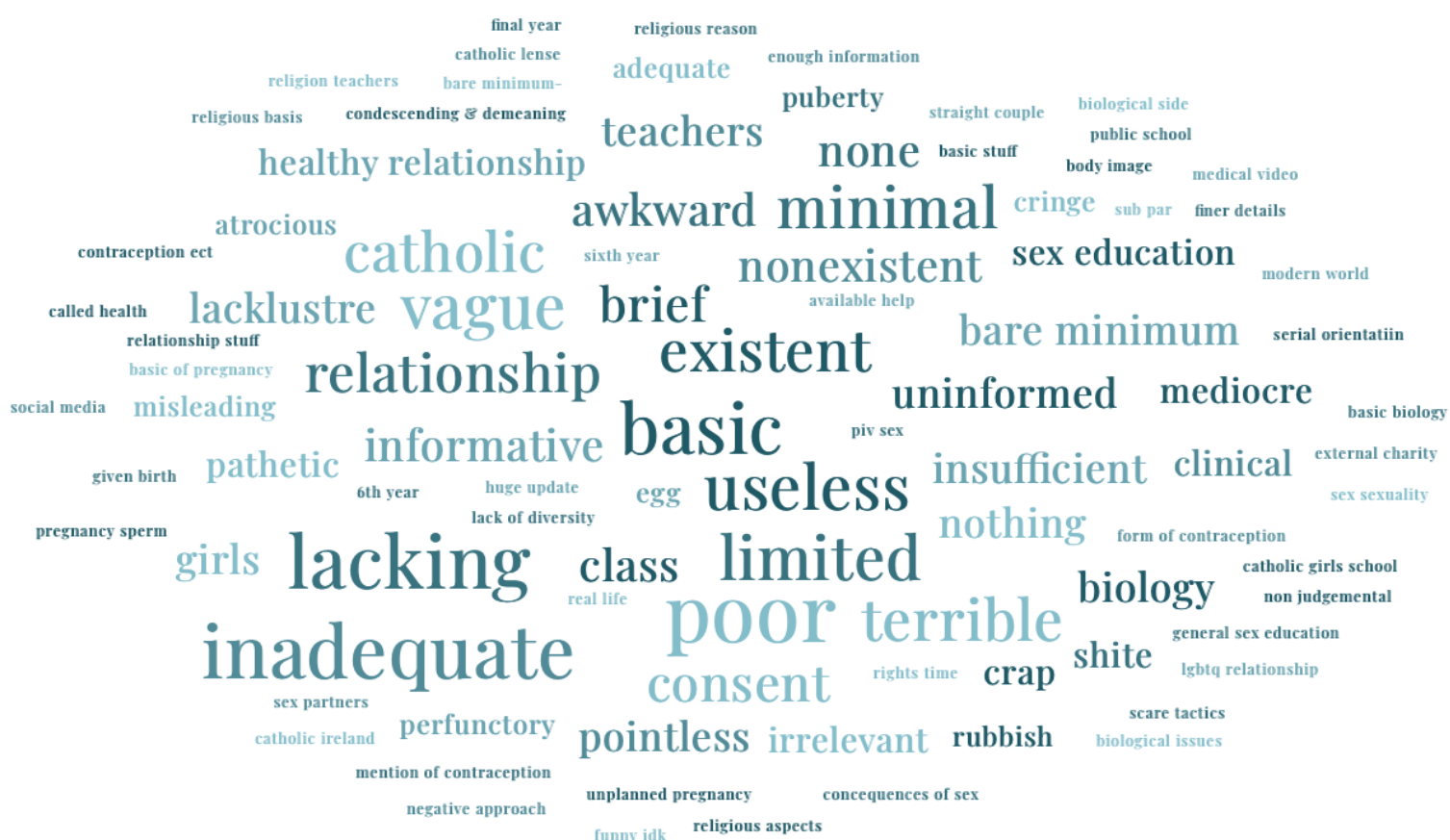
## Q8: Do you think the ethos of your school impacted the content and quality of the Relationship and Sex Education you received?

80.05% of our sample felt the ethos of their school impacts the RSE they received. This is problematic, as the information in RSE should not differ from school to school depending on religion or denomination. The "other" option was given so if respondents were unsure, they could go into detail. The take home from this option was that even if religious schools tried to be more inclusive in their RSE, it felt "awkward" as they were not trained in how to provide RSE adequately, or personal staff opinion was obvious.



# Current RSE In One Word

**Q6: What word would you use to describe your experience of Relationship and Sex Education in school?**



This word cloud includes the most common words or phrases used by survey participants to describe the RSE they received in school. It was expected the consensus would be negative (see "Any Use?" report by NIYF), but just how clear the negative sentiment has been is damning of our current RSE systems in place. "Poor", "inadequate" and "vague" were the three most popular terms. The most concerning response on this cloud is "condescending and demeaning", whilst the most concerning responses not listed above were "dogmatic", "scaremongering" and "indoctrination".

# What we want to see

## ***Q7 of the survey asked participants to describe what changes to RSE content and delivery they would recommend***

While each respondent gave their own opinion on what could be improved upon, consistent themes emerged.

### **More than one session, and not delivered by regular staff.**

Respondents noted that it is impossible to cover all aspects of RSE in one session, and often if it was in one session the wrong parts were emphasised. One participant noted they had a 35 class on intimate hygiene, and then a quick overview of everything else deemed "necessary". Respondents also noted that when delivered by normal teachers the class felt awkward and the teacher was visibly awkward.

### **Influence of religion on RSE.**

A common theme was frustration at religious doctrine making its way into RSE; this was in the form of shaming, abstinence only education and demonising of abortion services. Many respondents noted they received RSE from an external RSE provider with a Christian ethos. They did not feel this was appropriate.

### **Information for LGBT+ folks.**

Many participants noted that any RSE they received was not inclusive of LGBT issues or information. One explained that everything they learnt about sex they would go on to have as a gay man was from the internet and friends. Others noted that the only context that LGBT people was mentioned was in STI spread.

**Consent.** RSE being inclusive of consent going forward was one of the top issues raised in this survey. Given recent events across the island with prominent court cases it was communicated that consent education is obviously necessary.



**An emphasis on the R in RSE.** Many respondents noted they were never educated on communication styles and the reality of having romantic relationships in the teenage years and beyond. RSE that recognises different relationship styles, communication practices and abuse (ie, gaslighting) is necessary for the RSE to be fit for purpose.

**Less shame, more positivity.** An overlap of themes emerged wherein respondents associated shaming in the RSE content when it had a particularly strong religious tone. One participant noted the lack of realism in teaching "waiting until marriage" as the only option, when in fact many in their class were already having unprotected sex. Within this, sex was not associated with positive themes. It was taught in a way that suggested if you had sex you were unclean, physically and morally.

**RSE should start younger.** It was recommended by respondents that while the content depth should differ for younger age groups, RSE should be present from primary school onward.

**Relevant, comprehensive approach.** A sentiment that recurred was that the information given in RSE was limited, outdated, and that it felt like a tick-box exercise on the school's part. One respondent noted they had to watch videos from the 1990s as part of their 2009 RSE session.

**Involve technology.** Technology has changed our lives dramatically in the past 10 years and this should be reflected in the RSE we receive. Calls for discussions around social media and body dysmorphia, sending nude photographs underage, and the impact of porn were all suggestions that should be implemented into any new curriculum or structure.

**Gender.** The impact of gender and gender roles is an important issue for our survey respondents. The need for discussion around men's mental health was highlighted by some respondents, especially relating to shame.

**Pleasure.** Mentioned time and time again, the notion that sex is an enjoyable experience was left out of previous RSE.



# Key Quotes

## Q7 How would you have improved the quality and content of the Relationship and Sex Education you received in school?

.....

"Talk more about **sex as something to enjoy**, rather than something there primarily for reproduction. When talking about contraception really only focused on condoms. **No mention of same sex relations at all**, everything was from a heterosexual point of view."

.....

Approach all aspects with the (natural) assumption that teenagers have sex, and therefore provide them with the information to **safeguard their physical and mental health**.

.....

It was far too **heavily influenced by the church and Catholicism**. Having some of our teachers, who we knew and trusted, talk to us honestly may have helped.

Well we received sex ed from an 80 year old nun. She couldn't control our class. She had no idea what sex/pleasure was. It was a joke. If we had someone young and cool and able to really talk about sex we would have paid attention and learnt something. **I learnt everything about sex on the bus home from school.**

.....

Making it more regular, even **mandatory** perhaps, like other subjects in school such as P.E for example, and also teaching in smaller groups to encourage more **young people to participate/feel less embarrassed**. Covering more aspects of Sex Ed such as relationships, pleasure, boundaries, rape etc. Rather than just the diagrams and labels.

.....

**Standardised Curriculum.**

.....

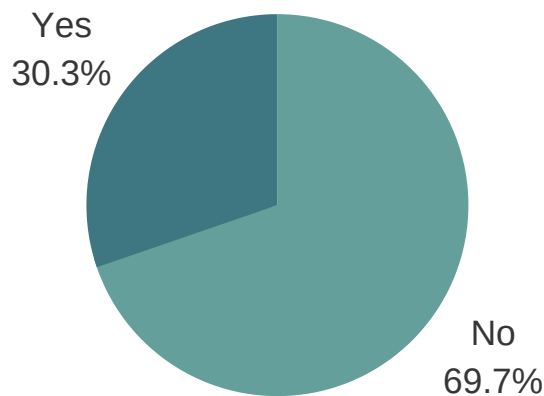
Removed religious aspects. Looked at **informed consent**, sexual orientation and gender roles and sex positive language. Looked at contraception.

.....

**Actually have some.**

# An Unrecognised Denial of Rights

***Q9 Did you know it is a legal requirement mandated by the government that you should receive full and comprehensive sex education?***

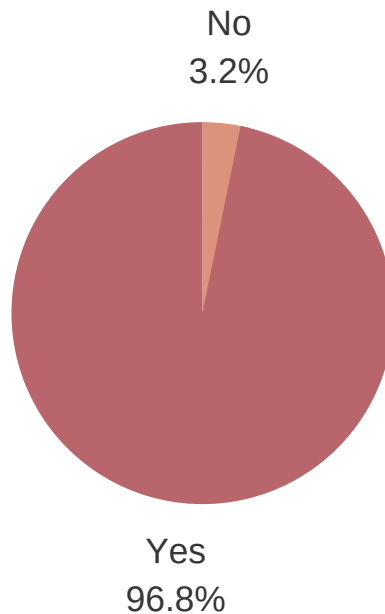


A majority of our survey respondents (69.7%) did not know that they had a legal right to RSE, whether they live in Northern Ireland or The Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, an RSE program has been a legal requirement in both primary and secondary school levels since 1995 (DOH, 2015), whilst in The Republic of Ireland there is a required six RSE sessions per year in secondary schools. Less than one quarter of secondary schools in The Republic of Ireland are meeting this target (ESRI Report, 2020).

***The importance of a comprehensive sexuality education is recognised in international law by organisations such as: The World Health Organisation, United Nations, ICPD, and European Union. It is clear our education systems are failing to meet their respective targets.***

# A Clear Call for Change

***Q10 Would you support a call for mandatory inclusive, holistic and positive Relationship and Sex Education in all secondary schools?***



An overwhelming majority (96.8%) of our survey respondents agree that it is time for an overhaul of our RSE provision and curriculum on this island. Where RSE exists it is falling short of the standard necessary to foster the development of our young people. Where it does not exist there lies a vacuum in which our young people must seek vital life information from the internet, peer groups, or heresay. In 2021, on this island that has overcome so much in recent years, we must right this wrong.

***Governments are bound to protect the lives, rights and wellbeing of their citizens and in refusing to provide young people with the fact-based, inclusive RSE they are reneging on and ignoring that duty.***

# Final Thoughts

*As we move together towards a bright future, so too must our RSE*

The conclusion from this survey is clear; an overhaul of our current RSE provisions in place (North and South) is not only necessary but urgent. It was clear in the depth of detail and number of responses we have received to this, our first survey, that the people of this island want change - dramatic change. The RSE of the past has been inadequate at best and scarring at its worst. We may never fully understand the impact of our lack of RSE provision as it will be felt in all aspects of society, but we can push for a future where our RSE is inclusive, positive, relevant, helpful and consistent regardless of the school in which it is taught.

RSE affects every single aspect of our life: who we think we are, how we interact with other people, the lens through which we experience life. At the core of what it is to be human is our relationships with one another - we deserve an education that provides with the tools to foster the best relationships possible.

# References

- Northern Ireland Youth Forum (2019). "Young people's opinions on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Belfast."
- Nolan, A., & Smyth, E. (2020). Talking about sex and sexual behaviour of young people in Ireland. ESRI, Economic & Social Research Institute.

# Author's Note

This survey was created by voluntary participation in a short survey. We thank our participants for their time, especially given the level of detail in which they discussed their opinions. We invite any and all to reach out to us via our website if they would like to further share their experiences or to become more involved with this project.

Lastly, we are more than happy for this information to be shared as widely as possible. We just ask that if you use the information provided in this document that you credit Love To Know.

